

NATURAL DISASTERS

by

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ABSTRACT

Natural Disasters is a collection of twelve short stories that feature a variety of narrators as they interact with the ones they love. In these stories, characters experience puberty, friendship, love, loss, trauma, and the everyday magic of living as they fight to master their own failings. Those lucky enough find solace in the forgiving beauty of nature, while others succumb to the untamable power of its disasters. This thesis is useful, important, and unique as it focuses on the stories of a variety of characters, mostly women and children, and displays the beauty and fearsome power of nature as the characters strive to achieve their goals. In today's political and social climate, women, children, and nature are often taken for granted, underestimated, and even forgotten about. Here, they are anything but forgotten. Women join together to fight trauma, children stand together and face some of today's worst natural disasters, and nature is portrayed as a source of magic. This thesis gives these characters a voice and shines a spotlight on their importance to the world and society as a whole.

To my family, friends, and professors who supported and challenged me throughout my graduate student career.

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SANTIAGO AND THE AJO

Domingo and I spend Saturday evening playing tag. The Ajo Oak, my favorite tree because Dad planted it the day Mom told him they were having me, serves as base. Mom keeps reminding me the tree was already ten years old at the time, but I don't care. The Ajo is mine. I cling to its rough bark, letting it scrape against my cheek as I hug it hello. I am nine, and Domingo is seven. When we tire out, we lie underneath the Ajo's branches, protected from the heavy Arizona sun's rays. We are not strong enough to climb the Ajo's branches, but we plan out which branch we will climb first when finally we are tall enough. We plot a course across the tree, detailed all the way until we finally reach the top. By then, we're sure the Ajo will be the tallest tree around.

Mom cooks in the kitchen, humming pretty songs to our tortoiseshell cat, Billie. Every few minutes she will peek her head out the front window and watch us weave our way around each other.

"These branches are too close to the house. Santiago, please let's hire someone to cut them. Just a trim."

I shake my head with a solid no. For as long as I grow, so will the Ajo. Mom sighs and ducks back inside. She and Dad have been trying to get me to cave for months. Dad even tried telling me horror stories about trees falling and crushing people in their sleep, but I never give in. I know the Ajo will never fall. The Ajo is strong, like me. By now, the Ajo is nineteen years old, though to me it is nine. The tree is wider than Domingo and I can reach around, and taller than our home.

“Do you think Dad will build us a treehouse when he comes home?” All Domingo can think about is the treehouse. It’s his solution to being too short to climb the tree. He says if he can’t climb branches, he can climb ladders. Dad has said he would, but he works double shift at the Cerreta Candy factory in Glendale. Mom worries he is working too hard but Domingo doesn’t mind as long as he brings us candy. The candy is always strange, too ugly to be sold Dad says. But it tastes fine to us. We gorge ourselves on Pink Cranberry Almond Clusters that are more brown than pink, stuffing our cheeks with them until we look like chipmunks. Mom scolds him every time, insisting we will ruin our appetites, but I can always tell Mom is happy he’s home. Even as she chides him, she must turn away from us because of how she is smiling.

“I know he will. This time he’ll build the treehouse for sure.”

Domingo nods, and begins to plan out what the treehouse will look like. It’ll have to start near the lowest branches, where the tree is sturdiest, but from there it can grow. A smaller, second floor will serve as our Crow’s Eye, where we can spy on happenings down below without being seen from the ground. I am impressed with Domingo’s reasoning, and I agree with his imagined layout. But when it comes to the ladder, retractable or solid, we argue. I want something grounded to the tree, something I can hold on to without fear of falling. But Domingo insists on withdrawing the ladder at a moment’s notice, keeping all nosy-no-good villains away from our fort. Finally, we agree to settle the matter as gentlemen. Whoever wins the next game of tag decides.

Our neighbors wave at us as we get up for round two. The man across the street runs a hose over his red car, his wife tans in the front yard. We wave back before Domingo presses on my shoulder, shouting *You’re it!* before tumbling away. I run after him, but for someone so

small, his legs carry him fast. We dance around the Saguaro at the end of our street, being careful not to brush its spines, before rushing back home. Domingo is desperate to reach the Ajo before me.

Before we reach the oak, Mom calls us in. Dinner is ready, and we must wash our hands. Game forgotten, we run inside. We grab chicken tenders with our bare hands before Mom gives us both a firm smack on the wrists. She folds her hands in prayer, and eyes us until we join her.

“Lord, we thank you for this food and we ask for your blessing. Please watch over Emanuel at the factory, and may Santiago and Domingo grow into fine boys. Amen.”

We sing our Amens right behind hers, and with a nod from Mom, we grab our share of food and gobble it up. Like animals, Mom says. We beg her to allow us to go outside again, and Mom nods her assent. She opens the door for us and but stops halfway. We push at her to move. She’s blocking the door, but Mom holds up her hand and we stand still. We follow her line of sight and there, out on the horizon, we see a fast-moving wall of dust. Domingo groans, knowing our games of tag are cancelled for the day.

#

Mid-evening and the windows are closed, shutters locked. With a last kick, I nudge the door shut. Outside, a thick cloud of dust and sand race across the Sonoran Desert. Cacti and dull mountain ridges are swallowed whole until not even a shadow is visible. We can hear the shift of sand in the grooves of the door, like lizards scuttling across screens. Billie flicks her ears up at the sound, just loud enough to catch her attention. Her eyes darken until we can barely see her yellow irises.

“Dumb cat, it’s just dust.” Domingo swats at her, and she jumps a foot in the air before scurrying underneath the couch. We laugh and laugh until Mom scolds us. Her voice sings as she tries to coax Billie out. Domingo and I peer through a slit in the shutters. The last rays of sun upon the cloud of dust creates a wall of billowing oranges and reds. The branches of our Ajo Oak shift in the wind. Silhouettes of our neighbors shuffle through, their mouths covered with their hands or scarves.

The winds hit us hard. They rip at the shutters, pulling and shaking until the shutters are torn open. Dust and sand assault the window, creeping through small gaps in the pane. A flurry of feet and Billie runs off to hide under our bed, low to the ground and tail tucked between her legs. The house gently creaks in the oncoming gusts, like Abuela’s knees when she comes to visit. Domingo frets, but I tell him the same thing Dad used to tell me. Our house is small, but sturdy. It will not blow away. The smooth adobe walls will not give. Mom says it’s a small comfort. Still, old vases and pots tremble dangerously close to falling. Mom lays out a sheet and nestles each vase into the sheet’s folds until she’s satisfied. We flip on the radio and hear only the busy muffle of voices buried in static. Another peek out the window and we can just barely see the sway of the trees. Mom guesses maybe fifty, sixty mile winds. She mutters a prayer that nothing bashes into our windows, and Domingo and I sing *Aaaa-men* together as a chorus. Against the howling of the wind, Mom thinks she hears sirens. Christ, she says. By now the sky is the color of rust, and only the streetlights of the nearby highway light the sky.

Outside, we hear a loud thump. Domingo cries, shouting *A giant, a giant*. I think of the dinosaur movie I snuck into last week, and the cup of water that shakes with each T-Rex footstep. Mom gathers us with one big hug, shushing Domingo.

“It’s the transformer, there is no need to fret.” Domingo asks if that’s like his toys, like Bumblebee and Optimus Prime, but Mom says it’s a big box that holds energy. That’s why the lights are out. Because the transformer blew, and all the energy has escaped. She says men will fix the transformer in time, but until then we must be patient. But the noise is followed by another, followed again by a sharp crack. Another thump, this time on the roof. Our front window shatters, the splinters of the shutters blow inside the house, carried by strong gusts of wind and dust. We run to the window, our Ajo Oak, my tree, the one dad planted the day mom told him they were going to have me, leans against our roof, its strong limbs scratching against shingles with every tug of wind. The low hanging branches, the ones Domingo and I dreamed of climbing when we got bigger, are the cause of our broken window. I want to scream and cry. The thing that I loved, the thing I have protected every year by refusing to let my parents hire someone to trim the branches, to let it grow the way God intended so that, one day, the tree will show how much we’ve grown. This tree, my Ajo, has damaged my home, my place of Mom and Dad and Domingo and me. I want to go out into the gusts and kick it for betraying me. Lightning cracks and flashes, lighting my tree in bright white. The criminal caught red handed. Dust and sand sting my eyes as they rush through the window and scuttle along the floor. I choke back sobs, trying to be older than I am.

“Santiago, I need you here.” Mom calls out from outside. She has jumped through our broken window and searches the ground, picking up whatever chunks of our shutters are left. “Hold these here.” She motions to the wall.

I jump out the window and hold the planks of wood against our house. Mom runs through the door, leaving it to slam open, banging hard against the wall inside. Domingo shrieks, and I

want to run in and see if he's OK, but my hands hold the splintered planks of wood. Mom returns with a hammer and nails. She nails each scrap of wood in place, carefully avoiding my fingers. The windows aren't completely covered but Mom says it will do. She calls for Domingo to open the door, and he pulls the door open with all his strength. It bursts open on his third tug and he falls backward into a chair. Mom shuts the door behind us, races to her room and yanks her favorite comforter from her bed. Abuela's wedding gift. She takes what's left of the nails and pounds the comforter against our wall. It moves with the wind as if there is an animal behind it, but it blocks the dust from filling our home. Where Billie is in all of this, no one knows, but Mom tells us to leave her be. Now that the wind has left us alone, she lights a candle and holds her hands in front of the flickering flame as she casts shadows of dogs, giraffes, and my favorite, a rabbit, onto the walls of our home. Domingo and I laugh, too delighted to worry about the storm around us. The winds continue well after the sun sets. Mom tucks us in to bed, but Domingo refuses to sleep without her so we all squeeze into her bed. Billie appears from beneath her bed and curls around our feet. Still, we cannot sleep. Mom tells us stories about when we were born, how much we cried, and how much she loved us. How much she still loves us. She tells us we are her precious ones, and Domingo and I agree that she is ours.

#

Domingo and I wake in the early morning when the sky is still sleeping. Our footsteps are padded by the soft layer of sand from last night. Mom waits for us on the couch with Billie, sipping tea she made over the gas stove. With a last chug, she asks us if we are ready to go outside. It is only then we notice that the winds have stopped and the comforter is still. We nod eagerly. When Mom yanks open the front door, a shower of yellow dust litters the floor. She says

we'll sweep it all up later. Outside, the dust still hovers in the air like snow. Our gravel driveway is stained a dirty yellow-orange, and farther down the road cars slowly pull off the shoulder, their flashers glowing against the haze. Our neighbors wash the grit off their windshields, and birds take low, cautious swoops through the air. Farmers dust the dirt off their crops while their dogs shake the dust from their coats. Mom walks out to glance over the house and gasps. Domingo and I turn and marvel at the fallen Ajo Oak. It has pulled up our thin patch of lawn like carpet, its roots twist like cobwebs visible to all for the first time. It leans heavily against the house, but Mom sighs in relief. A few shingles are missing, but there is no other damage. When Mom and Domingo aren't looking, I give the Ajo a swift kick.

We walk down the street, our hands linked together like chain fences, peering in open windows as we pass. The warm halogen glow from the houses hang in the dust like fog. We watch families unlatch their windows, take account of the damage. On the highway, a trucker blows their horn in two short taps, and the sound echoes through our neighborhood as if calling us from our hideaways.

Back home, we find Billie's paw prints stenciled across the floor. We grab brooms and push out the dust that seeped in from the cracks of the doorframe while mom delicately gathers the shards of glass from the broken window. We are small, but Domingo and I work together. I hold the broom because I'm taller. Domingo sweeps because he likes the sound it makes. Billie jumps under the couch, but she reaches out and swipes at the broom every time it passes by. Mom praises us for our hard work and Domingo and I grin until our cheeks hurt. Mom's phone vibrates on the kitchen table and Mom runs to answer the call. I hear her call out my father's name and Domingo and I rush to talk to him. After telling him how we fared overnight, Mom

holds the phone between our ears. We clamber to tell him about the Ajo first, shouting about Billie and the broken window and the dust all over the house. I hear Dad chuckle and tell us how relieved he is to hear we are OK. He promises he will be home tonight and that he will help us clean up. Domingo and I tell him to hurry before saying our goodbyes. He ends the call and Mom takes the phone away. Domingo and I run through the house, shouting that Dad will be home, not caring for fallen trees or even candy. Mom opens the side windows, still unharmed from our tree, now my least favorite of the trees, and lets fresh air filter inside.

FORMATION

Caroline has lived alone for much of her sixty-six years of existence. She has no husband, no children. Her sisters died years ago, and she gets no visitors. The neighborhood children have deemed her the neighborhood crazy lady. Caroline's not sure why. They never stick around long enough to ask. She figures it's the hours she spends in the garden, her fingernails caked in soil, and waves of graying brown hair frizzing as she works. Caroline accepts this. Despite how she may appear to the children, she likes the quiet.

Caroline has developed a regimen to life. Every morning she wakes just before dawn. She doesn't need much sleep anymore. She takes her medicine, soothing the aches of her muscles and strengthening her thin bones. She goes to work in her garden. Vegetables mostly. Pumpkins, lettuce, eggplants, and tomatoes are her favorite. And she grows flowers. Beautiful sunflowers and daisies. She thinks they're vibrant. When the sun comes up, she goes back inside and eats. Fried eggs on ham and toast, sprinkled with pepper. She likes cutting into the yolk, watching the yellow stain spread through the bread. While she eats, she watches the local news. Nothing else is worth watching. She pays close attention to the weather and mutes stories that make her cringe. She likes the human interest stories best. The rest of the day is crafting, except for Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, when she drives to the gym to meet her physical therapist, required by her doctor to build up strength in a previously broken arm. Today is Tuesday, and today she will knit. She usually knits gloves and socks, and donates them to local charities helping the homeless. She never really pays much attention to what she's doing. She just knits. Her hands know exactly what to do. But, today, she looks down at her hands and realizes she has sewn booties just the right size for a toddler.

#

Caroline spends the rest of the day contemplating why she has made clothes fit for a child. She has never thought of children before, not in decades anyway. And her nieces and nephews are grown now with their own families in faraway cities. She chose to bypass having children altogether, just as she chose to bypass marriage. Adoption or fostering was never an interest for her, so why the booties? Certainly it wasn't regret. Her nieces and nephews were all the family she needed. Whatever the reason, she is consumed by the idea of little feet filling those booties. She fantasizes about how her life will change once—if—she brings a child into her daily schedule, and remembers helping her sisters change foul diapers while fighting off two chubby legs. How long ago was that? Thirty years? Forty? Her bones grow weary just thinking about it. But she also remembers the grip of her nieces' and nephew's baby fingers around her own, and the swelling of pride at their astonishing strength.

#

Later that afternoon, Caroline is bent over her garden as she builds a new flower bed. Planks of wood, an opened bag of manure and soil, and her favorite shovel lie scattered around her. This goes against her schedule, but after the booties she is eager to keep her mind busy. The high sun beats down on her, sweat beading off her nose and flecking the unpainted wood with drops of salt. Beetles cry out in a monotonous buzz, a sound that has become as normal as the high temperature. The air is heavy with humidity, and the gray cotton candy clouds approaching from the west suggest a storm. Once she finishes constructing the bed, she can paint a lacquer over the wood to protect it from mold and rot. Digging through the soil, Caroline remembers forming mud castles and cakes with her nieces and nephews in her garden. It was silly, but the

children loved it. Their creations were real, no matter what anyone told them. Caroline puts her planks to the side and forms the basic mud tower that was her specialty. It's been years since she made one, but the process of building comes naturally. Her nephew always asked her to make turrets and a flag pole. To impress him she'd dig a moat and place a large piece of mulch as the drawbridge. Caroline is interrupted from her thoughts as the next-door neighbor's dog barks and runs to the front of his yard, held back by a white fence. Caroline looks up to see a woman and her child, maybe five, approaching the dog hand in hand. Caroline watches the child eagerly. Her brown hair is braided into two pretty plaits, and her cheeks seem a permanent red, as if freshly pinched. The girl giggles and laughs as the dog begs for their attentions. Her joy peals through the neighborhood like bells, bringing memories of her nephew's delighted shrieks. Caroline itches to hear it again.

#

The next day, Caroline rises before dawn, tends to her garden, eats fried eggs on ham and toast. She turns on the news and sees the anchor reporting a sinkhole that has formed just three blocks from her home. Caroline knows the neighborhood, located just a five-minute walk down the block. The neighborhood is an old one, lined with oaks covered in sheets of Spanish moss. The homes there have history. She read once that a famous inventor had lived there. She can't remember the one. Unfortunately, one of the homes was damaged. Her favorite. A two-story, red brick masonic-style home, the east wall once completely covered in ivy. The camera pans in on the house, and Caroline gasps as she watches the brick exterior slope into the edge of the sinkhole. The anchorwoman warns that any minute now another portion of the house may crumble into the sinkhole. She says the family was evacuated, but most of their belongings were

left inside. A woman, presumably the owner, sobs about family pictures and home-made Christmas ornaments.

“It’s where we raised our family. It’s where we have all our memories.” The woman on TV holds her children close, both in their early teens. The camera cuts away to warning signs a sinkhole is forming, listing sloping yards and sudden exposure of unpainted fences and poles. The anchorwoman warns anything can cause a sinkhole, from heavy rains to drought. None of this matters to Caroline. She thinks of the distraught woman, and feels a pit form in her stomach. She has no way to relate, but she cries for her anyway.

#

Caroline wakes in the early morning, but turns away from her garden. She drapes herself in a light jacket and slips on her flats. She wants to see the sinkhole, wants to see the place that swallows memories. Outside, the sky is still dark. Dawn lingers over the horizon, the sun’s rays just a faint glow. Only raccoons and stray cats are up, prowling for the last of their food before they sleep again. Caroline’s footsteps echo down the street, scaring the animals away.

The area around the sinkhole has been roped off, but for the moment no one is watching it. Overnight, a part of the brick home crumbled away just as the anchor suggested. Caroline can see shadows of the furniture inside. The sinkhole itself seems to have grown, blocking off all entrance into the house. Water leaks into the hole, a broken water main supposedly the cause of the thing. Bits and pieces of furniture and items from the house sit on the surface of the sinkhole. Caroline marvels at the exposed earth, its rich scent drifting through the air. She bends down and rubs a pinch of soil between her fingers. Velvet to the touch, and a dark, healthy brown. Who knows the last time it has seen the sky. She thinks of the minerals; the benefit it could give her

garden. To take soil from the thing that swallows memories and use it to create her own. She looks around before dropping to her stomach. She reaches in and grabs a vase. Its top is broken off, but it'll do. This close to the hole, the smell of wet earth fills her nostrils. She stretches her arm, and feels her joints crack under the strain. Just a little further. Mud rubs up against her coat. She shifts forward, just enough, and feels her new-found vase hit soil.

#

Caroline mixes the fresh mud into her garden's soil. She mists it with water, and lets it sit an hour. When she returns, she takes a clump of this mixture of new and old soil from her garden. The dark mass crawls with earthworms. She forms it with her hands, the way she remembers her nieces and nephews did. She takes another clump and another. She piles it high, one on top of the other. She thinks of her nephew's mop of brown hair, the little girl's pink cheeks, the patter of feet and babble of laughter as she works.

#

Between garden visits, Caroline cannot focus. She's drawn to her backyard. She watches over the pile of earth with greedy hunger and worries when she doesn't see any development. To her, it looks like a pillar of mud. No more. She reminds herself of the adage. A watched pot doesn't boil. She goes back inside, closes her curtains facing the garden plot, and knits, taking designs from an old children's magazine.

#

The next day, Caroline returns to the mud. The sun has turned it dusty gray. Parts crumble, rolling down the mound of dirt like loose pebbles. Too dry to form. Spray bottle in hand, Caroline sprays a fine mist over her creation. The musty smell of wet earth fills her nose.

Now damp enough to work, she molds form from the shapeless dirt. Here, a forehead. There, a palm. Two knees, dimpled and fat. She smiles as the soil begins to look like the child she's dreamed of the past few days.

When she goes inside, her crafts focus on getting ready for the newborn. She continues to knit him clothes. She builds him a makeshift crib out of drawer and quilt and buys play toys, like a rocking horse, building blocks, and so much more. When she goes to her therapist, her mind focuses on the needs of her soon-to-be child. She goes to the store and buys diapers, bottles, and formula. The cashier rings up the purchases and asks Caroline if they are for her grandchildren. The teenaged girl is too young to know she shouldn't ask such questions. Caroline would normally think of the question as rude or nosy, but she's so happy she can't help smiling at the girl.

#

Caroline lets the sun bake her project. She returns in the early morning when birds first flutter from their nests and the sky is stained with pastel yellows and oranges. With the heat of the waking sun tingling against her back, Caroline hydrates her child, still just a clump of dirt. She continues her work. Messy brown hair made of carefully twirled straw that curls like bedsprings. Eyelashes made from cut grass. As the days pass, Caroline pays close attention to fine details, molding plump cheeks and fine fingernails, strong feet, ten toes.

#

The next morning, Caroline wakes and brews herself a nice cup of coffee. Coffee is not a normal part of her schedule. Studies have shown that coffee wears down bone, and her doctor has ordered her to limit her consumption. But the A.C. chills the house, and the warmth of the

mug in her aching hands soothes her. She savors the sharp flavors. The perfect treat to start a long day of work. Caroline has calculated she is in the final stages of creating her boy. She has formed him to satisfaction. All that's left is to give him life, though she's not exactly sure how. Would he simply sprout from the earth, like a carrot or potato? Or would she need to pluck him from a vine like a tomato? Perhaps something totally different. Whatever she needed to do, she trusted it would come to her, much as the idea to create him had come. Caroline walks to her back door to check on her son's progress, and finds her creation gone. A small pile of dry dirt sits in his place. She runs out, crying for her lost boy. The idea of him was so real, so close. She sinks to the ground and touches a crumble of dirt not far from the where he had been. From there, another and another. Each in the form of a small, muddy foot. Caroline sits up and traces the footprints' path to her shed, a small plastic thing she uses to store seeds and tools. She rises and stumbles after his foot prints, terrified he will harm himself on a shovel or hoe. She finds him on the shed's earthy floor, a toddler instead of the infant she expected. In a moment of deep concentration, he rises onto his unsteady feet, as chubby as she planned. He teeters like a baby giraffe before taking a step, and then another. He giggles in delight. His chubby arms wave in the air, struggling for balance. Caroline watches in disbelief as her child slowly masters his first steps.

When her son finally falls with a thud onto his rear, Caroline picks him up. She presses her face into the small patch of dark curls that grow from the crown of his head and inhales. He smells of sleep, freshly mowed grass, and wet earth. She carries him inside, and sets him on the tile of her bathroom while she starts a bath. She remembers how to test the warmth, running the water on her bare wrist until just right. Just an inch or two of water fills the tub. She takes him

and places him in the water. Caked on mud slides off, and the water quickly turns brown. She readjusts her plan, opening the drain and letting the room temperature water rush out of the faucet. She takes a cloth and runs it over her son, gently scrubbing the earth from his real human skin. She continues until the water that streams over her son comes out clean, not a speck of mud left to color the tub. She washes the last of the dirt from his cheeks, and towels his locks dry with a cloth. He laughs as she drapes the cloth over his head. The sound reminds her of the joyous peals of laughter from the little girl with pink cheeks and of water running from her garden hose. With his mouth open, she sees her son already has a handful of teeth.

#

Caroline names her son Adam. For the first time since Caroline created him, she takes a moment to rest and watch the news while the boy sleeps. The anchor team still discusses the sinkhole, with the breaking news story featuring the latest feedback on the sinkhole's growth. The hole opened up over an aquifer, and while the sinkhole had stopped growing, it would take time to obtain a permit to fill in, as the aquifer would be affected. In the meanwhile, the news crew has backed off, and many of the people in the neighborhood have temporarily moved to hotels or with friends due to a high risk another sinkhole could form. Instead, the news team's helicopter circles above. When she mutes the TV, she can hear its blades vibrating through the air. The cameraman on the helicopter zooms in on the sinkhole. It plummets a few feet before revealing water so clear it chills Caroline.

#

Adam seems to have skipped the infant stage. For that, she is grateful. She's not sure she has the strength, physically or mentally, to care for a baby alone. He can speak in short

sentences. At most, two or three words. He already knows basic vocabulary. His accomplishments astound her. He has a penchant for getting dirty. He loves messing around in her garden. He will sit in a patch of dirt, dig his hands into the ground, pull out handfuls of dirt, and swallow them. He likes to gather hairbrushes, vases, and other such items from around the house and leave them in his dirt patch. When Caroline wakes, she finds he has already dug holes in the yard, unearthing the dark soil and exposing it to the chill air. In the center of the garden she finds him sleeping, his collection of stolen objects strewn around him.

#

When Caroline watches the morning news the next day, the news team is beginning to address the sinkhole. A permit has been obtained, and progress can be made towards filling in the hole. A landscaping crew has arrived and is slowly packing it tightly. The neighbors have returned, as no other sinkholes have formed, and they watch the crews work from their driveways. The hole will be fixed within a few days. Adam looks up from his toys, sees the sinkhole, and stands in front of the TV. His eyes are large with wonder. When the video cuts away to a commercial, he turns to her, his arm pointing at the TV.

“What’s that?”

#

The next morning, Adam tugs at Caroline’s shoulder, waking her from her sleep. His face is crusted with sleep and his curls are matted to his forehead.

“Come,” he insists.

Caroline does as she’s told. She’s promised to take him to see the sinkhole when everyone else is sleeping. She rises from the bed, and slips her feet into her flats. She can worry

about readying herself for the day later. She takes her coat and the two head out the door. Adam grips Caroline's weathered hand with the strength only a child can possess. He is silent, and Caroline can tell he is thinking about the sinkhole. She lets him have his quiet so long as she can continue walking beside him. She never needed company before she made Adam.

#

Adam stands at the edge of the sinkhole. Caroline can feel him pulsing with life.

"What is it?" he asks her. The same question from yesterday.

"It's a sinkhole. Opened earth, caused by water erosion. I took you from here."

Adam nods and looks back at the rupture. He stares until a truck turns around the corner. Caroline recognizes it as belonging to the men who are responsible for filling in the sinkhole. "Come along, Adam. We must let them do their work." With a slight tug of her arm, Adam dutifully follows, allowing Caroline to lead the way as he watches the men bring their equipment to the sinkhole's edge.

#

Caroline can't help feeling guilty. Since taking Adam to the sinkhole, he hasn't said a word. He sits in the dirt in quiet contemplation, bringing up fistfuls of earth close to his eyes. Occasionally, he will tug at her skirt and the two will walk to the sinkhole again. As they pass it, he drags behind her, eyes glued to its slowly diminishing shape. She worries about his health. At dinner, he takes only a little of the chopped carrots from her garden. After a few handfuls, he pushes the bowl away and turns his head from her, refusing to eat.

#

After Adam's third day of silence, Caroline finds him in the garden patch. The sun has yet to rise and she worries how long he has been outside. He looks pale. No matter how much she calls him, he won't break from his reverie. She waves her hands in front of his face but Adam stares on. His full eyes unblinking. When she touches him, his skin crackles like dry earth. Caroline sobs at the loss of his velvety skin. Taking out her gardening water bottle, she mists him until he is dampened. His skin turns grey, and the musty smell of wet earth permeates from him. Still, he does not move. If this goes on much longer, she will lose him. Caroline suspects she knows how to help him. She's known for days. But she can't stand to think about what it means. When he was still himself he dug in the garden and rooted himself in the soil. He has been trying to get back to the sinkhole, searching for the small remains of fresh dirt taken from the opening. But taking him back to the Sinkhole means letting him go, never seeing him again. Caroline's tears dot the gray surface of Adam's dry skin. She knows what she must do. Caroline takes the wheelbarrow from her garden shed, and stops it in front of the boy. She fills it with the mixed remains of her garden soil and the sediment from the sinkhole, and she gently places Adam on top. The sun's rays are just beginning to peep over the horizon, and Caroline must hurry. She wheels Adam and the soil down the street, each step echoing like the seconds of a clock, each step another second closer to losing Adam. The silence itches her skin, and she longs to hear him laugh again. She points out fluttering birds and scurrying squirrels in the hope he will rejoice with her. Nothing. She turns the corner, and gulps down sobs at the sight of the lot. It's just a small pit, a slight hollow in the ground. The crew filled the sinkhole in, tightly packed the earth so that there was nothing resembling Adam's sinkhole, save the remaining crumbles of brick perched at the edge of this new earth. Caroline lets the wheelbarrow drop from her support. She

falls to her knees. Gently, she lifts Adam from the wheelbarrow and rests him on this newly packed earth. Nothing. Adam sits and stares blankly as he had been for days. The dirt is no longer the sinkhole, no longer Adam. Underneath it perhaps...Caroline places Adam back in the wheelbarrow and returns to the earth, her hands twisting and clawing through the dirt, digging with all her strength for the hope that the sinkhole's original loam can still be found. Bones weak. Joints sore. It doesn't matter. If she doesn't get through to the old sinkhole, Adam will die. The spreading crackle of earth from his skin confirms this. No matter what Caroline does, she will lose him. She is determined not to let him down. She looks over her shoulder to see what's left of Adam, still sitting in the pile of mud in the wheelbarrow, his color now an ugly, dull gray. Looking back to her work, she sobs in anger. She can only do so much without proper tools. She rises, and stumbles into a run. Adam will still be there when she gets back. She will only be gone a minute. She runs down the street and cuts the corner, straight to her house, straight to her garden. She pulls the shovel off the shed's wall before running back. Her knee aches and cracks with every step. A distinct crinkling sound falls as she races down the street, bringing the sensation of fire along with it. She hasn't run this much in decades. With a quick glance to the crumbling remains of her ashen son, Caroline sobs and throws herself onto the pile of dirt. She plunges the blade into the mass of hard earth, breaking the dirt up until it crumbles like the soil in her garden. This she can work with. She hooks her shovel under a pile of dirt and pulls it hard over her head, landing with the sound of fluttering rain. Again, she digs her shovel into the earth. Tosses it over shoulder. The soft sound of it reminds her of Adam's feet teetering on her wooden floors. Sweat drips in her eyes. Her wisps of gray hair frizz around her. Birds wake, their lone chirps answered by whistles and tweets. The woman digs and digs. Soon, she must step into her

hole to reach the earth. The pile left behind grows, loose earth slipping down its edges. As she digs further and further, the smell of fresh earth rubs against her cheeks like Adam's sleeping breath. She lowers her shovel and hears the *chnk* of metal against brick. She stops to pick it up. A red brick caked in mud. A remnant of the home swallowed by the sinkhole. This is when Caroline knows she has reached it. She has opened up the rupture. Using her shovel, the woman crawls her way back up the pit to Adam.

Tears drop from Caroline's face and speckle her hands coated in mud. Adam still rests in the wheelbarrow, but his color is returning. A soft, milky brown dappled with flecks of gray. Being near the sinkhole seems to give life to Adam, and he stirs just enough to catch Caroline's eye. She sinks to his level, enveloping him in her arms. She whispers to him, telling him she loves him, thanking him for being hers. His breath is warm against her cheek as she takes him in her arms and carries him to the sinkhole. She lowers to her knees, and lets Adam break free of her grip. She eases him into the sinkhole, and her heart leaps when he strings out a babble of laughter. His feet sink into the earth, and Caroline watches as Adam's skin slowly darkens to a deeper brown. He turns to her, waving goodbye with his pudgy arms before he loses his shape, returning to the mud she stole him from. Then he is gone. She breathes in deeply, cherishing the smell of rich earth.

EBB AND FLOW

The sand at night glows. Crushed seashells scattered on the beach reflect the light of the slivered moon. The surf is rough, our voices cutting through in decibels. We dance in the shallows, our feet splashing in the tide. It tugs us back to the ocean, calling us to some primordial form. We let our feet sink lower into the mud-like sand and anchor there. Waves rip past, licking our hands with cool water, and pull back again. In and out. Clumps of untethered seaweed rush by, tangling on our feet. You laugh and squirm at the touch of it, slimy and soft like silk, and kick it away. Drops of water fall like tinkering bells. We lift our feet and they squelch free of the sand, their imprints quickly washed away with the tide.

We lie on the beach, flapping our arms to create angels. Sand filters into the sleeves of our sweaters, chilling us. We dig in and pretend we're crabs, casting our eyes to the sky. Ursa Minor rests further up shore, her stars shining brightly while Gemini and Orion lurk on the horizon. We talk about the time a boy took you on a midnight trip to the beach ten minutes north, the air balmy and electric as a storm just off the coast raced ever inward. You had to beg him to head back, to take shelter in his car. He made you cry too much, I say. In return, your voice is sharp as that old cliché about hindsight rolls off your tongue. I wonder how many times you've said it; how many times you'll say it again. Still, I shouldn't have said anything. I point toward Andromeda, just a speck in the sky, no different than any grain of sand. But I point and point until you laugh, pointing in an opposite direction as you say There, there it is.

A quarter past one, and we head back to my car, feet trudging through the sand. We don't talk about the way you flinch when my foot brushes against a tin can and clanks down the cement like a broken dish, or how you break into a sweat when I lock the car doors. We let the

unsaid hang between us. I turn up the radio, one hand on the steering wheel, another beating out the rhythm on my thigh. You close your eyes and breathe. In and out. Your panic rips past, licking your hands like saltwater on open wounds, and pulls back again. Unearthed memories wash over you, tangle on your feet. I want to help you kick them off. I want to scream and throw stones until they retreat. Instead, I drum out the tune until the tides settle.

TRAILBLAZER

I am thirteen when I meet Maria at my very first Girl Scout camping trip. The apple-green sign reading Welcome to Camp Mah-Kah-Wee hides behind it miles of dry palms and old oaks littered across 250 acres of land broken up by an algae green lake and winding, overgrown trails. It is spring, and the lake is a no-go. Gators flock to the water from all around. After months of low rainfall and unseasonal sweltering Florida heat, low water levels in nearby canals have driven gators to our lake, still deep enough for the gators to mate. And with snapping turtles, errant herons, and the stray small animal, the scout leader tells us the lake is like a buffet. Around the lake, Camp Mah-Kah-Wee is divided into twelve camp sites, each connected by overgrown trails. The tents are nothing but musty green tarps situated on top of decks, to allow for flooding. Each tent crams in five cots, draped in mosquito netting with the support of PVC pipes. The girls in my tent make a great show of checking under the deck before the light fades over the trees. They tell me that last year an older troop camped nearby planted alarm clocks under each tent, set for midnight. They have not forgiven them. Maria is the only one not afraid to crawl under. She ties her bandana around her head and shuffles around. We watch as she goes, hearing nothing but the rustle of leaves and a few bumps as Maria knocks into the posts.

“There’s nothing,” she says.

Her voice is muffled and far away even though we know she’s only just underneath us. She comes out with cobwebs stuck in her hair like gum and it takes all four of us to get everything out.

After a dinner of burgers and corn cooked in foil, we gather by our camp fire, just overlooking the lake. We can see the glow of another camp fire on the other shore, and we yell

hello in the hopes they can hear us. We are greeted with bellowing rumbles that echo across the water. For a minute, we are joyous that our voices carried so far. But then we hear the hiss, see the glittering red eyes that makes our ears boil. We scramble back behind the flames, eager to put distance between us and the gators that float in the water like logs. But Maria steps forward, shouting louder and louder, leading the troop as she sings about sharks eating fishermen and monkeys over swamps. We join her, each of us shouting as loud as our lungs will let us but somehow the gators win out. Defeated, we sit in silence, huddled together shoulder to shoulder and listen to the gators until the leaders usher us to our tents.

#

My legs are graffitied with leaves, pollen spores, and whatever else is scattered across our tent floor. Maria and I sit at the entrance, letting the wind push the tent flaps open, sun soaking our faces. Maria sticks leaves in my hair, announces me as Queen of the Woods. I think back to the cobwebs in her hair. I don't mind the bugs.

#

My pale green vest is second hand. Found on clearance at the local Goodwill and washed with too much bleach. The once leaf green color is faded, stained with yellows and whites. When Mom wasn't looking, I tried taking a green sharpie to it, tried to cover the fading fabric. Mom shoved my hands away and took dozens of pictures, telling me to smile until my cheeks hurt. What a lucky find, she said. Again and again, what a lucky find. I nodded, seconding her praise with hums and mm-hms. I wanted her to be happy. I knew it was all we could afford.

#

Resting on our camp's picnic table, Maria and my tent-mates compare their badges. Maria and the others have been Girl Scouting since they were in first grade, just Brownies then. Maria rolls her eyes every time I ask.

"It was so dumb, we got patches for everything. Now these I had to work for."

She shows me her Girl Scout vest, a real green and lined with rows of badges, and points out her patches for survival skills, learning about computers, and arranging community service. I touch each one, fingers grazing the expertly sewn threads, greedy for the bright colors and intricate designs. My own vest is embarrassingly plain. Mom just stitched the numbers 6009 in the top left-hand corner, the four rectangle patches signaling my troop unevenly spaced. I wear my hair over it, never pulling it back even on the hottest of days.

#

I spread out my sleeping bag across my cot. The stench of mothballs spreads like wildfire. Maria pinches her nose.

"Yuck," she says. "Smells like my grandma."

My face burns. I keep my head down, willing my hair to form a curtain to hide the red spreading across my cheeks and down my throat. The sleeping bag is my neighbor's. Miss Louise is old, but Mom says she used to travel a lot in her day, and that she frequented places like the Grand Canyon, Zion, and the Appalachian Trail. Her cataracts keep her from going far these days, but she kept all her camping gear stored in her Cedar Lane chest stuffed with mothballs. Mom told me the smell would wear away with time, that we were lucky Miss Louise loaned it to us at all.

What a lucky find.

But the smell has not worn away with time. If anything, the scent of moth balls feeds off the exposure to fresh air. Maria is quiet a bit.

“Here,” Maria says. She shuffles her bright purple nylon sleeping bag across the floor, and pulls mine off the cot, dragging it closer to her. “Smells kinda gross. I like it.” Maria scrunches her nose and smiles, tongue sticking out.

#

Near the lake, there is an old oak that leans over the water. Worn wooden steps are nailed into it. A diving board of sorts for kids to launch themselves into the lake. The girls know not to jump, but flock to the tree anyway. They climb to the very edge, five or six clinging to the trunk, pointing out the leather diamond heads of gators sprinkled across the water, their ridged tails swishing like a snake behind them.

#

In the tent, I learn that Maria is six months older than me. She’s ahead of me in a lot of things. I just finished my period last week. My very first one, kept a secret from Mom. I spent the whole five days stuffing my underwear with wads of rolled up toilet paper in fear I’d leak. I walked with legs clamped shut, sat lightly, slept on my side even when my legs ached. But Maria had her first period when she was eleven. Early by many standards. She knows the tricks to keep from leaking. She walks with confidence. She sits like a man. She sleeps on her back. I listen as the other girls compare periods, and I am too shy to ask for tips. They list what to do when they get hit with cramps, where they hide an extra pad or tampon, and how to know when it’s about to come. Maria has an answer for everything, and when she doesn’t, she thinks on it with a drawn out hmmm before giving her answer. I realize Maria is our tent mom.

#

Grasping to the wood of the jumping tree, Maria asks why my vest is different, and then again asks me why my sleeping bag smells of mothballs. I sit there with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat.

“It’s ok if you don’t want to say.”

I nod my head and fix my eyes on a gator sunning on a log fifty feet from us. Maria fills the silence with facts she learned about wildlife. A prerequisite for her Wilderness badge.

“Did you know the female Brown Headed Cowbird doesn’t nurse its young? It carries its eggs to a neighboring bird’s nest for the other bird to care for. Usually the other bird’s young die from starvation. Even gators care for their young.”

I open my mouth and my voice comes out like a frog. I tell her I don’t think my mom has enough money to care for us both. I tell her I’m afraid that one day Mom will leave me in someone else’s nest.

“Oh.” Maria thinks for a moment. “I was hoping it would be something I could fix.”

#

Around us, the campfire roars with heat. The troop leader throws in piles of fast burning palm fronds one after another, blazing and burning faster than she can throw. The camp counselors toss in logs and the flames crackle with delight. The fire licks over the dry wood and grow taller and taller, seemingly climbing on itself. The heat radiates, roasting me in my plastic chair until I stand, fearing I might melt into it. I take a step closer and feel the heat seep up my arms. Maria holds out a bag of marshmallows and a thin branch from the pile of wood.

“Not so fast.”

The troop leader hovers behind me and motions at my hair, draped over my shoulders, resting just over that careless patch. With a firm hand, she sweeps my hair into a fist, and pulls it back with a hair tie. My crooked patch, for all to see. The blank green vest bare. I stand with my arms pasted to my sides, elbows pointing out. I push my chest inward, willing my patches to shrink in to themselves. Anything to hide. Anything to be unnoticeable. But when I look down, the four block numbers are gathered in a straight line, no space between. The loose remains of thread barely noticeable even in the glow of the fire, shadowing where my mother's clumsy hands sewed in zig-zag formation. At the bottom, lining the hem of my lime-green vest, the new friend badge, my very first badge. And beside it, the chores badge. The game badge. A hundred badges glued on or fastened with safety pins.

#

The fire dies, and we scatter to our tents. The moon rises above the trees, orange and round and perfect. Things we can't see snap twigs in the woods. The gators resume their calls.

#

Maria tugs at my shoulder, motioning outside our tent. I nod, and shuffle my way out of her nylon sleeping bag. I pull socks over my damp feet, stuff my feet into my shoes, and pray no bugs have taken residence since I last wore them. Outside, the full moon lights the ground with silver. Maria waits in flip-flops and a jacket. Flashlight in hand, I start the path to the bathrooms, an ugly cinderblock building flooded with yellow halogens before Maria yanks me back.

“No, this way.” Maria points to the nearest trailhead.

I shake my head. It is too late, too dark, too big, too empty for just the two of us.

“Come on.” Maria doesn’t wait for me to follow. She marches forward, leaving me to sit in the tent and wait or follow her lead. Maria, the trailblazer. Me, the follower.

#

Maria shines her flashlight from tree to tree, dipping and sidestepping. Neither of us want to walk into a spider web. We walk past spiders larger than our thumbs suspended on delicate frames of string that fluctuate in the breeze we leave behind as we pass. Around us, purple yellow orange red eyes watch, skirting on the edge of the shadows. I never ask Maria where we are going.

#

My shoes squelch and pull as feet meet mud and I know where Maria is taking me. My fingers brush against the rough patches on my vest. In front of me, Maria leads the way. Across her back are a wide array of patches, the most recent fastened with safety pins and super glue. I reach out and take her hand, squeezing it in thanks. Small rumbles like snores grow ahead of us.

#

We climb the planks of the bent oak. The low, rumbling hiss of a gator beneath us vibrates the water, shaking like steam over its grey and green scales. Up close, the sound is like Mom’s coffee pot in the morning. A dull growl fills the air and shakes me, vibrating, beating against my heart until I think it will take up the new beat. Resounding, growling, vibrating, never stopping. Water leaps off the gator’s back like marbles. Head and tail held high, the animal growls, the sound thundering in my chest. With the light from the flashlight, I see dozens of eyes scattered over the water, twinkling like stars. I grip Maria, my arms clinging to her like the leaves on my legs.

We stay there the whole night, watching the gators sift below us, hissing and bellowing well until dawn. Maria and I take turns sleeping in the crook of the tree while the other watches and ensures neither of us falls into the lake. It is a long night, every part of me aches as I balance us on the body of the tree. As the sun begins to rise, the gators swim away from the lake shore. I jostle Maria awake so that we can watch them leave together. Their tails swish powerfully behind them, creating jetties of whirlpools as they swim. We hold our breath, not daring to move a muscle until we lose sight of them. When the gators are finally far enough to signal safety, we tiptoe down the tree and back to land, only then realizing just how many mosquitoes bit us in the night. Our arms and legs are flecked with soft pink bumps and we scratch them as we walk back to camp. Our footsteps echo in the cool, early morning air. Raccoons and opossums hurry back to their dens as birds wake from their nests. We stop occasionally to consult the trail markers, and twist left and right to avoid the freshly formed spider webs. Judging by the markers, our camp is only ten minutes away.

“Plenty of time to get settled back into our tents before anyone notices we were ever gone.” Maria is smug, proud of our night out.

We agree we will dress ourselves in whatever layers we have in order to mask the mosquito bites. Perhaps they will even keep us from itching them. We walk hand in hand, humming campfire songs as we go until Maria stops in her tracks. Her arm pulls at my shoulder, yanking me back beside her.

“Maria!” My voice is sharp. I have never shouted so loud. My shoulder hurts, and the lack of sleep makes me irritable.

Maria jumps at the sound of my voice, but holds a finger to her lips, her eyes wide and warning. She moves them slowly to the path in front of us. I follow her gaze and feel my pulse beat against my ears. My heart stammers and I shoot back, my feet scrambling against the earth to run but my legs move like jelly. The bull gator hisses as it spots us. It is easily the largest I have ever seen. Fifteen, sixteen feet maybe. It walks towards us, huge as a log on strong, webbed feet. His heavy tail drags behind him. I tug at Maria's arm to move, but she is planted in place. The alligator hisses again and picks up pace. He moves like a lizard, scuttling across the trail as his four scaled legs carry his body closer and closer. I shout Maria's name again, tugging at her shoulder the same way she tugged at mine. Maria won't move, and all the while the gator is coming, less than 100 feet away. My eyes fall on Maria's Survival Skills badge, threaded with rich oranges and greens. Mountains slope across the circular patch, a small fire at the center. The badge is looped together with mustard yellow thread. I look down at my own vest, the sickly lime vibrant in the morning light. I think of all the badges Maria haphazardly tore from hers and attached to mine, and then of the gator's muddy green scales, dull and dry and writhing as it runs closer and closer. I'm going to miss every one of my new badges. I pull the lime green vest from my shoulders and place myself between Maria and the gator. I yell at it, waving my vest, badges and all, in the air before tossing it. It lands right in the gator's face, blocking his vision. He snarls and thrashes at it, and I take the few seconds I've bought us to yank at Maria's arms again. I pull with everything I have, and, this time, Maria stumbles after me. We run back the way we came, back to the jumping tree. We are too afraid to even think of running diagonally. Our brains scream run and we listen. I hear the seams of my vest rip as the gator tears the vest to shreds. We run, dashing through spider webs, their silver threads tangling in our hair. We jump over logs

and tree roots. We run until our chests ache. Blood thrums in our ears, drowning out the sound of our feet as we thrash through the underbrush.

THE RESURRECTION OF JOSH

I wake to the alarm blaring a nasal, consistent buzz. My hand flies to it, swats it like a bug, fumbling in the dark of my room to find quiet. Six messages on my phone, all from Mom. Each message asks me if I'm ok, sends her love, says she'll see me this afternoon. I pull the blinds open, and soft light pours through the window. It's too much to deal with so early. The sun rose maybe thirty minutes ago, its warm rays already burning the night's fog. Cars pull out of driveways and lawn crews show up to their jobs. For a moment, everything is as it should be. Everything just like every other week. I hate it, and wish that for just a second the world would stop.

Turning to my bed, I pull up the sheets and tuck them neatly into place. My eyes glaze over the side of the bed that has been empty for a month. I open my armoire. Just the right-side door. Josh's clothes are pushed against the far wall, out of sight. It's easier to pretend that his side of the armoire doesn't exist. His bedside table sits just the way he left it. A dusty lamp hovers over a mildewed copy of some book picked up from a garage sale down the street. I pick out a black dress, an easy way to look sophisticated when I'd rather be in bed, and lay out the dress on my bed and head for the kitchen. A pile of sympathy cards sits on the counter next to a box of memorial cards. I pause at the card embellished in printed white roses. Glued to the center, Josh smiles. It's a silly picture. Josh wears a three-dollar plastic crown and a lopsided grin. In his hand, a bedazzled wand swathed in a cloud of pink feathers. The picture of the tea party with his niece, just last month. It's an unusual photo, but Josh was never one for simply smiling at a camera. It always had to be something different. I tear my eyes away from Josh and start the coffee I prepared last night. I crack two eggs into a glass bowl and whisk them into

milk. Warming a frying pan on the stove, I flick a chunk of butter into its center and watch the butter melt as I rotate the pan, spreading the butter until it covers the pan's entirety. I pour the eggs in and let them sit, sprinkling in a handful of cheese and red peppers. The coffee machine beeps and I pour myself a cup. Its steam drifts into the cool air like smoke. But it's watery. I look over the directions, Josh's handwriting. Perfect, when he made it. How did I manage to mess up coffee? I absentmindedly stir the eggs while I read over his precise measurements. Was the coffee not fresh? Does that matter? I reach down to stir the eggs again and my finger presses against the side of the pan. The pain takes a few seconds to reach me, and I pull my hand back as if being struck. Already the finger is an angry red. I hold the finger to my mouth before running it under water.

"Do you want ice for that, Tess?" Josh asks

I turn fast, and find Josh sitting at the breakfast table, riffling through the day's newspaper. The smell of musty ink tickles my nose. Was I still dreaming? The burn on my left index finger, the watered-down coffee. Would I dream that?

I nod, unsure what else to do, and watch as he walks to the freezer. I expect his hand to pass through the handle, but he opens it just fine.

"Chilly." He says, as he grabs a cube from the ice tray. He holds the ice to my finger, his hand brushing against mine. It was a hand, alright. Real, solid flesh, complete with the scar on his right thumb, a woodcarving accident from when he was an Eagle Scout. His badge of honor. "You have to be careful. I can't do the eggs for you anymore." He takes a sip of the coffee and cringes. "And someone will have to teach you how to make the real stuff."

"I did it just like you." I say, holding out the recipe card from the drawer.

Josh smiles, his eyes dropping a little in the corners. “Used to, anyway.”

Joshua was thirty-three when he died in a train accident. The commuter train was running late, so the conductor went a little faster than he was supposed to. The train derailed. Fifty-eight people died that morning, Josh included. I expected to lose him to old age, at home with me, not on the side of the tracks just ten minutes from downtown. But Josh is here, sitting in front of me as he checks the shattered face of his old Mickey Mouse watch and frowns.

“You’ll be late if you don’t hurry.”

How could he know? How could he know I planned to go to work today and not prepare for the memorial? How does he go on like nothing even happened? He ushers me out of my chair and into our room, my room now, helps me with the zipper on my dress, and pushes me towards the door, handing my purse and keys. “Have a good day,” he says, before kissing me on the cheek and closing the door behind me. The same old, every day routine.

#

No one at work thinks I should be here. They drop by in groups of two or three. They awkwardly ask me things like how I’ve been, how I’m holding up. Eventually, they get to the real question. Why am I here? What about the memorial? I give them the same answers every time. I’m fine, fine thanks. It’s later today, thank you for your concern. But they keep coming. Finally, I snap. I tell them they’re right, I shouldn’t be here. I’ve been horrible, holding up horribly. Last night I fell asleep with the help of a bottle of wine. My doctor prescribed me Xanax, and suggested I take melatonin before bed. I’d rather be at work than home. I don’t know. I don’t know I don’t know I don’t know. This drives everyone away, and I am left in peace. I stare at the fabric walls of my cubical and imagine Josh at home, waiting. He can’t

exactly go back to his job, can he? He's dead. He's been dead a month. Everyone knows he's dead. Mutual friends still give me sad looks when they see me getting coffee. They still bring me casseroles for Christ's sake. After Joshua died, so many people acted like I couldn't cope, half expecting me to jump off the deep end. They came by at least twice a day, eyes probing for signs of fractures, for some evidence I was losing myself. But I sat there and smiled, thanked them for coming, returned their Tupperware the next day filled with cookies. I went back to work. I did errands, I got coffee, I did what people do. I kept living. But maybe they were right. Maybe I have jumped off the deep end. I have a ghost in my house, after all.

I pick up my phone and dial my therapist, Ellen. I only began seeing Ellen a few weeks ago. My insurance covered it, so why not? Normally, these things involve schedules. I'm not expected to see her for another two days. But this is an emergency.

Ellen's office is nicely lit by the large modern windows that take up the entirety of the fourth wall. The windows overlook a manmade creek and a simple but lush garden. The two armchairs are plush, and lean towards one another the way friends would when telling a secret. The first day I went in expecting to be psychoanalyzed. I looked the shelves over for inkblot tests, chose my words carefully, avoiding any phallic reference that might bring me to Freud. Instead, Ellen sat with me and as I talked about Josh. We discussed the fights Josh and I used to have, the silly ones every couple argues over, like whose turn it is to take out the trash, or should we buy this apartment on the east side or the one on the west? Ellen and I talked about how Josh used to joke that he could always be a lumberjack. Just grow a beard and he'd fit right in. I dared him to do it. By the end of the month, we discovered he'd never be able to grow a full beard. It grew in patches, and reminded me of a bear with mange. Josh was so sad, and I couldn't help but

try to cheer him up. “You don’t need the beard. You can still be a lumberjack.” He smiled, grabbed me, and rubbed his half-bearded face against mine.

It had been nice to think about him in the days that followed the crash. Welcome, even. I missed thinking about him. But with him here again, Josh’s presence takes over, growing like mold in the dark places he had left behind.

I imagine Ellen sitting beside me, listening as I tell her Josh has returned, that he’s probably still sitting in my kitchen.

“Hello, Dr. Schultz’s office, how may I help you,” Ellen’s assistant asks.

I open my mouth to speak, but I already know how Ellen, how anyone, will react. She’ll prescribe me more medication. Tell me if these delusions persist to schedule a CAT scan. I hang up the phone.

#

I take off work early and come home to an empty house, the faint sound of someone mowing fills the silence. Josh is nowhere to be seen. I’m relieved, and chalk it up to a night of too much wine. I should know better than mix alcohol and medication. I kick off my heels at the door and climb the stairs to my bedroom. As I ascend, I hear gaps of silence between inhalations growing closer. Snoring. I turn the corner and enter my room. Josh sleeps in our bed, the right side finally occupied again. His paperback sits face down, where he has split the book open instead of using a bookmark. I watch his chest rise and fall from across the room. I step closer and place a hand on his chest. His skin is damp and hot from sleep, eyebrows knit together. A nightmare, perhaps. There were many nights like this, where I slept in the crook of his arm, ear pressed to his rapidly beating heart, listening until my ear burned with numbness. There were

many nights I'd sit up and watch him sleep, imagine his heart pumping blood through his body. And now he's here, dulling my memories, overwriting them with new ones. Dead and not dead. When I press my ear to his chest, his heart is too loud, too strong. It fills my ears and blocks out the sound of his breathing. I turn and head back downstairs, turning on lights, the radio, anything to drown it out.

#

I finish gathering most of the memorial cards and set them in the trunk of my car just as Josh wakes up.

"Hey there," he calls down the stairs, freezing me in my tracks. His eyes catch mine before traveling down to the cards in my hands, his grinning face meeting his sleep crusted one. For the first time since his arrival, Josh seems aware of the occasion. "Is it time already?"

"It's been a month."

"Do you have to go just yet?"

"The memorial is in an hour. I have to get to the church and help your mom set up."

Josh waves his hand dismissively. "How about I make you breakfast?"

"It's two in the afternoon."

"So brunch, then." Josh noses past me and takes out the pan from this morning, freshly cleaned. He opens the fridge and pulls out thick slabs of bacon. He heats the frying pan and sets strip after strip across its surface.

"What are you doing?"

“Making bacon, silly.” He grabs my laptop from the breakfast nook and opens it to his favorite cartoons, pressing play as he pulls out a bowl from the overhead cupboard. He pulls out a chair for me at the kitchen island and motions for me to sit. “How was your day?”

“It was bad. Really, really bad.” I answer without thinking. “You’re too much.”

Josh sighs and runs his hand through his hair. I watch every strand bend and flex under the weight of it, and wonder if it still grows.

“Why are you here?”

“You wished things would go back to the way they were.” He says it like it’s obvious, like dead fiancés come back from the dead every day and no one blinks an eye.

I look him over and I begin to question if I made him up. A psychotic break, is that what they call it? Who hasn’t wished to see their lost loved-one one last time? I’d done it before, after all, when I was six. Grandma had just died and I was helping Mom and Dad clean out her place. I was so sure I heard her laugh, just for a moment. That steady sound, followed by a gasp of air, a pitch almost like a hiccup. When I told Mom about it, she said it was in my head, something I wanted to hear, so I heard it. It has to be the same for Josh. Had I missed him that much? Had I wished him back the way I had wished to hear grandmother’s laugh again?

On my laptop, Wile E. Coyote runs into a rock, believing the painting on it to be a tunnel. When Josh laughs, the sound rings through the house. He chokes on his own spit, and hacks as he turns red in the face. I grab him a glass of water and hand it to him. His hand is still warm. The chug of the water is real. But I expect him to smell like something. I expect Old Spice, the smell of his shirts, the smell after a shower. But when he pulls me close he smells of bacon grease, slick and fatty, and underneath that, nothing. I pull away from his grip and storm out of

the house, slamming the door behind me. I realize I forgot the memorial cards inside, but I decide to leave them.

#

Our families are waiting. I've arrived fifteen minutes late. I open my trunk and grab an armful of memorial card boxes, lugging them all at once to Josh's grave site. I dump them in an un-ceremonial heap and I hear Josh's mom sob. Josh's brothers neatened the boxes and grab handfuls of cards to spread around. I stare at Josh's casket and fight back the urge to rip it open, see once and for all if Josh is really dead or if everyone has been playing a prank on me this whole time. I remind myself I identified the body. I stood in the cold morgue beside Josh's mother and nodded as the mortician pulled back the stiff white drapes. Do things like engagement still hold after death? Is that what he is? Dead? Josh is flesh and bone. His heart still beats. He can open doors and make food. He ruffles my hair and pushes me on my way to work. But Josh won't talk about being dead. He acts like it never happened, and everything as it should be.

#

After the memorial, I follow the priest as he walks back into the church. I walk the halls, eyeing the Stations of the Cross, stopping at the fourteenth and final block. Jesus is laid in the tomb. Even in the stations, the resurrection of Christ is not included. Was it too strange, even then? What would the fifteenth station look like if it had been included? I can only imagine Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdalene in shock. I watch the priest greet his parishioners and wonder what I would even say to him. Bless me, Father, my dead fiancé is back from the grave. Would he take me seriously? Kick me out for blasphemy? Rush over to see the miracle with his

own eyes? Would he in time become Saint Josh, patron saint of lovers and train wrecks, stolen memories and bacon grease? What good was such a saint? What blessing could he ever bring?

The priest turns and greets me. He recognizes me from the memorial and places a comforting hand on my arm.

“What troubles you?”

I tell him the dead haunt me. I say they come to me at night, and linger in the morning. They unearth old pains and bury treasured memories. The priest nods, his smooth scalp dotted with liver spots and freckles. He takes my hands. His wrinkled skin is cool, but comforting. He guides me to a pew and says a prayer with me.

“Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners.”

Before I leave, he tells me to let the ghosts go. I want to tell him it’s not that simple, how can I bury what’s already gone and come?

At the altar, a woman rehearses the steps of her wedding with her soon-to-be husband. She laughs, and her laughter fills the hall.

BUBBLEGUM PROMISES

We were six when you told me we would go to the stars. It was the winter of 1986, and we had just watched Halley's Comet snowball across the sky, its tail only a wisp of dust. We spent weeks preparing for Halley's arrival. My parents dragged us in to watch the evening news, showed us pictures of a time before we were born, my great-grandparents' frowning faces unrecognizable to me. Eventually we came to believe that the appearance of the comet would change our lives, but when it finally inched its way from one end of the sky to the other I cried and cried as if I had expected it to be more. To cheer me up, you built me my very own rocket. It came complete with a Walkie Talkie to contact Ground Control in case of emergencies, and sheets that would serve as parachutes upon reentry. You swore on the quality of the tinfoil lined exterior, and promised me it could survive twelve years' worth of travel. The cardboard door pulled open to reveal a cockpit for two and a cubby just for Rex because you knew I'd be homesick without him. Buttons upon buttons glistened in the afternoon light. We never decided what they all did.

We spent months blasting off again and again, returning to Earth only when Ground Control called us back in, my mother insisting I had to be home for dinner. We were searching for stars, but all we ever found was dust.

The cardboard box sits in the back of my closet now, stuffed with college memorabilia I don't have the heart to look at. Photographs of hot afternoons spent at the springs, me trying to get a tan on the lawn, and the outline of leaves you stuck on my back when I fell asleep. The arm of your worn Alabama sweatshirt hangs over the side of the box, as if trying to be saved. Somewhere at the bottom, mixed in with old ticket stubs and dust balls, lies the promise ring you

got from a bubblegum machine in the mall. You slipped it on my finger, promising you'd come back from college over Christmas break while I thought of our forgotten rocket ship, crumpled up tin foil, and Walkie Talkies with missing batteries. That August, you used my rocket ship as just another cardboard box to help you move to the University of Alabama, an entire two states away. You didn't come back that winter. You didn't come back at all. Postponed phone calls were pushed back further and further. Months after I last heard from you, I found out you were dating a girl you met in an Astronomy class. You promised her galaxies, light years and light years of stars and nebulas. Years later, after you graduated and moved to a distant city, your mother returned the bent and battered box. Your crooked letters Sharpied over and replaced with bold letters that read *junk*.

GOOD CHRISTIANS

Late September, and the leaves in Blue Ridge are already changing. Mustard yellows and burnt oranges burst into view, replacing the summer green leaves on aspens and maples. Dried out leaves break off in the wind and flutter down to lace the road in fall colors, crunching under the wheels of my bike. A wide turn onto Orchard and Tara is already in her driveway waiting for me, backpack strapped on and her mother quizzing her on the Brittany Spears CD she found stashed in a corner of Tara's room.

“Do you listen to this trash, Audrey?”

The tips of my shoes just barely touch the ground, holding my bike in place as I shake my head the way Tara and I rehearsed. “No, ma'am.”

Tara dutifully tells her mother the CD isn't hers, but a girl's from school who insisted she listen to it.

“I wasn't actually going to, Mom.” In truth, Tara and I have already listened to the CD five times.

Tara's mother frowns, but she is convinced. With a wave she watches us ride our bikes out of the neighborhood and straight to school.

#

As far as Tara's mother is concerned, Tara and I are good Christian girls. We only sing psalms and on Sundays, we fast all day in our best dresses until after the church service at five. We say our daily prayers and dedicate our lives to Jesus. And we do actually do all these things—when Tara's mother is watching. But when Tara's mother is far away and out of ear shot, we sing the latest songs from the radio, stuff our mouths with biscuits stolen from the

kitchen, and curse with words like crap and hell. And while I am what Tara calls “eternally naïve,” Tara has dated her fair share of guys. She has held hands with them and has even placed the occasional delicate kiss on their cheeks. All of fourteen and I still don’t know whose hand goes where and I have no idea how anyone manages to breathe while kissing. Hundreds of rom coms later and I still wait for one or both members of the couple to pass out mid-kiss. More than once I have paused a movie and demanded that Tara tell me how they kiss without breathing. No matter how much I ask, she won’t say a word.

“You’re too young,” she says.

I take offense. I am only six months, two weeks and three days younger than her. To Tara, I might as well be nine. But then, on her fifteenth birthday, we sneak away from her family’s party with a few bottles of sparkling cider and drink them all. The empty glasses litter our shared treehouse, built in the days when we were twelve and begging for independence. We’ve grown since then, with small bursts of white and purple scars branching out like tattoos across the inside of our legs. But the old oak is solid, and holds us with only a few prolonged creaks of protests. I ask her about kissing again, and how people angle their faces. I ask if the angle they chose allows for breathing or if their body somehow stops needing air for a few minutes when Tara says she doesn’t like kissing boys.

“Messy business,” she says.

“Isn’t it all?” I say, thinking of the numerous rom coms I’ve watched, and what always comes after the kissing. A gentle wind blows through the cracks of our hideout. Past the walls, the smaller oak branches rub against each other, creaking in the breeze.

She is silent a while before telling me about Felicia. Felicia, our new Mary for the Christmas program later in the year. All blonde hair and freckles. Half the class hates her for stealing the part, for getting to hold Jacob with the tiny ears, the littlest boy who always plays Jesus. One day it was just something she noticed. The way Felicia's hair fell against her collarbone. A few days later she realized it was still on her mind, that bony collarbone, jutting just above her shirt collar, the one with that slight lining of lace so small you can barely see it. And now all she can think about is that lace scrapping against Felicia's skin.

Tara stops and her breath is ragged, cheeks pink.

"Sorry," she says. "I shouldn't have told you."

She gets up to leave, stooping as she goes, and I ask her if she loves Felicia.

Tara shrugs. She doesn't think she really understands love. But she does know this. Felicia is like the taste of sweet potato fries with cream cheese dip. She is the sound of rain falling on earth, she is the warmth of the sun on her back, the smell of freshly cut grass. She is all these things she cannot grasp or hold but can only feel and know and she thinks that might be love. She turns to me to see what I think. I don't know either. But I have stared at the boy with the small ears who plays Jesus every year at Christmas, and I think that's love too.

#

The next morning, and I'm still thinking about what Tara told me. I wonder how long she's known; how long she's put up with kissing boys. A small part of me is angry. I feel like Tara's mom, standing in her driveway and watching her daughter ride away, thinking she knows her daughter better than anyone in the world. But Blue Ridge is a small town, a Christian town, and I suppose I can understand. I make a silent promise to do my best to keep her secret. If

anyone ever found out, she'd be shipped off to camps like Lake Blue Ridge Retreat before Tara could ever say a word. I knew plenty of kids who have been sent there. Just last year, my cousin, Beau went willingly. He thought God could help him, thought the camp counselors could take his "unnatural thoughts" all away. When he came back, he wasn't the same. He lasted three weeks in Blue Ridge before he just couldn't go on.

I can't let the same happen to Tara. She looked out for me from the moment we first met, a helpless eleven-year-old caught with my first period on my very first camping trip. A disaster for anyone. But Tara had her first period three months before and had come prepared. She gave me half her stash of pads and helped me dispose of my blood stained underwear before anyone noticed. We're blood sisters now, and I'd never let anyone hurt her.

#

At lunch a group of girls discuss their futures, comparing notes on their dream man, their ideal wedding, and the number of kids they want to have. Before Tara and I know it, there are plans for everyone to live on the same street, to have our kids grow old together. When it's my turn, I don't know what to say. My mother was married at nineteen, and it seems far enough away to guess, so I tell them that. I tell them nineteen. I say yeah to kids, yeah to the fence and the neighborhood, yeah to growing old together. I don't know what else to say. When it's Tara's turn, she laughs. The girls giggle until they realize she's making fun of them. They sit up, defensive.

"Why not?" they ask. "Aren't you interested in boys?"

One of the girls, with perfectly straight hair and a sweet button nose, grins.

"There's been rumors going around about you, Tara."

I want to say I've heard rumors about them, too. I want to tell them I know about the games they play, slapping their hands against the inside of each other's thighs, closing in on the other's personal space. All for the attention of it. But Tara shakes her head and we move to a different corner. Tara is angry.

"They don't know anything."

I stay quiet. It was wrong what they said, but if they know nothing then I know less than nothing.

"They don't know," she says again.

I can't go without asking anymore, and so I ask.

"What don't they know?"

Tara gives me a good long look, like she's trying to decide who I am. I puff my chest out a bit and hold my head high, trying to look older. Trying to look anything but fourteen. Finally, she sighs.

"You can't tell your parents I told you."

I cross my heart, and recite the pledge: "Cross my heart and hope to die."

So Tara tells me. She tells me about the way they kiss, covering girls with slobber as if they were trying to drown them. She tells me how they smell and feel. Warm but sour and old. But I don't understand. All my life I have been told men are gentle and kind and shinning. All my life, at church, at home, on TV and in movies, their kisses are soft and chaste, the source of true love. I tell her so.

Tara shakes her head and simply says, "Not always."

#

The next day a group of boys corner us in the courtyard, pushing us back against the red brick walls in the corner of school that no one goes to. They leer at Tara, shifting from one leg to the other as they look her up and down.

“Is it true? Are you really a lesbian?”

“So what?” Tara’s head is held high, defiant.

I wish Tara had denied, wish she had pushed the boys out of her way and walked to class, walked to a teacher. Anyone who might help. And then I am flooded with guilt. For years I have promised to protect her, my blood sister, and now I am too afraid to stand up with her. Too afraid to say yes and damn the consequences. The crowd grows and everyone is in on the secret. It starts small, a few smirks or sneers. Kids staring is nothing, we can take it, but then there are whispers, and whispers egg on taunts. The girls from lunch appear and giggle as the boys pull Tara’s hair and push her further against the wall. I am elbowed deeper into the crowd as kids move forward, each eager to get a better view. And I don’t fight it. I let myself fall back. Tara’s eyes catch mine and I try to express how sorry I am. Sorry I’m weak. Sorry I’m not brave like her. Tara frowns and tears her eyes away, and all I can remember is Tara saying how much she hates the way boys feel, how they grope and push. The boys shove Tara into the wall again. Except this time, they shove too hard. Tara cries out as she hits her head against a rain pipe, an exposed nail gouged into her scalp. She’s bleeding and it runs like a river down her head, over her eyes and into her mouth until there’s nothing but red. There is shouting and the crowd runs, afraid they’ll get caught. With the crowd gone, I run to hold Tara in my arms and tell her she’ll be ok, tell her it isn’t really anything, just a scrape, and that the nurse will be able to patch it up

real quick. Tara is quiet, staring blankly at the courtyard while I cry and cry. I don't know if she'll be ok.

#

The wheels of my bike slice a clean line to Tara's house, cutting through shallow puddles and snapping over crisp twigs, remnants of last night's thunderstorm. Humid air seeps into my clothes and clings to my skin while sweat breaks out across my back. A week after the incident and the cut on Tara's head has dried and flaked away, leaving only the smallest of scars behind. Tara's shaken and cold but I'm confident she'll recover. She's Tara, after all. Braver and stronger than I will ever be.

As I near the driveway of Tara's house, a small white van idles while Pastor Luke and a few men I recognize from the church stuff Tara's backpack into the trunk. On the side of the van, in bright blue letters, Lake Blue Ridge Retreat's logo shines in the morning light. Tara's parents come out to say goodbye, waving absently at the darkened windows. Her mother, red eyed and flushed, grips her frowning husband's arm for support.

"Where's Tara?"

They turn to me, and immediately place themselves between me and the van. Behind them I can hear the muffled sound of yelling.

"Oh, Audrey. We're sorry, we meant to call your mother. From now on Tara won't be biking with you to school. Will you be all right by yourself?"

"You can't let them take her. They'll hurt her."

Tara's mother turns away while her father places a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"You've been such a good friend to Tara. You did your best, didn't you?"

I slap his hand away just as the van shifts into drive. Behind the blackened windows, I hear Tara pounding her fists, yelling for me to help her. I don't know what else to do, so I jump in front of the van just as it starts to roll down the driveway. The van jolts to a halt and the frowning pastor presses his fist on the horn. Behind the pastor is Tara. We lock eyes before her parents snatch me out of the way and the van rolls forward again, out of the driveway, down the street, and out of sight.

WHAT THEY KNOW

Andrew's opaque white skin shines, the greasy residue of sunscreen layered one application after another. His father died of skin cancer five years ago. Andrew has sworn he will not die of skin cancer too. More importantly, his twin boys, Elijah and Oliver, both only six, will not die of skin cancer. They will not have to watch their father get slice after slice of skin removed every month. They will not have to help their father search for off-colored lumps. They will not have to sit by a hospital bed as their father succumbs to the cancer that got under his skin and into his lymph nodes and intestines.

Here in Montana, they do not have to worry. Andrew tells himself they left death in Florida. On the lake, they are surrounded by hills and mountains and sky. Andrew knows they are at a higher elevation, and as such the family is at a much greater risk of skin cancer than they were in Florida, but the heat in the midday is dry and sweltering and is easier to make excuses to stay indoors. In the afternoon hours, he and his family rest under the blast of the ceiling fans until evening, when the summer sun does not set until nine o'clock and there is always more time.

He pleads with Eli and Oli to sit. The motorized rowboat is small, and bounces uneasily in the waves. The two boys are perched at the very edge and the boat tips with them, its rim edging ever closer to the freezing water. The boys wave to their mother on the rocky shore, snacking on cheese sandwiches. Sara sits prettily in the shade of a pine tree, her floppy hat protecting the few faint wisps of remaining hair. She is draped in layers of loose, protective clothing. The layers cover the fragility of her arms, the thinning of her legs, and the emergence of her ribs. Andrew thanks God the boys are too young to question Sara's health, and prays she

will overcome the cancer pulsing in her lungs. Andrew has known her for fifteen years, a good portion of both their lives, and he cannot imagine a life without her.

The boys move to jump into the water and Andrew holds them back. He ensures the life vests are securely fastened around his children's shoulders.

"Safety first," he says. He reminds Eli and Oli to wait forty-five minutes after they eat their lunch before going in the water. "Best to make it an hour. Just in case."

#

Eli and Oli go out. It is early in the season, barely the end of spring, and there are no neighbors yet. Not until the temperature rises. At least, that is what their mother says. The boys like being alone. Everywhere is still and their feet echo down the mountain valleys. They walk around the isolated neighborhood, currently more trees than houses, and point out everything that delights them. They point to the chipmunk furiously gnawing on a seed. They point to the lavender growing in bunches and the bees who swarm on the purple flowers. They point to the rise and fall of the mountains and they point to the eagles soaring high, high above.

"Here we come," they say, racing down the narrow, dirt road. To everyone and no one in particular.

The houses in the neighborhood are big and the yards are bigger. The lawns are so big that Eli and Oli aren't sure where their yard ends. The father has pointed out the boundaries of their land, but the boys point beyond. From what they understand, there will be no other children. They don't like this but their mother reassures them by telling them the mountains are all theirs. They like owning the mountains. The mountains burst from the water and go on for miles. Their old house, the one they left behind in Florida, was perched on the edge of a busy two-lane road.

It was never quiet. Here, there are no cars racing down the street, no neighbors cutting their grass or revving their engines. The wind trickles its hands through the leaves, just soft enough for the boys to barely hear the leaves whisper. Unseen insects drone in the prickly air, cool and still and wet. The insects are content, humming, the sound as subtle as a heartbeat. The boys remember the insects from Florida. Loud and big and always in your face. Every day they wailed and wailed, especially on hot, summer evenings. Down the mountain road, they can hear birds. Just a few singing quietly. The sky is clear and blue and the grass basks in the rays of the rising sun. The world awaits them. Their feet crunch against the fallen cones and acorns, leaving crushed remains for squirrels to pick and choose. Herds of deer peek from the cover of dry, yellow overgrown grass. The boys stop to watch. In the quiet, Eli and Oli feel too large. Too noticeable. Disturbing the peace here feels like a sin. They stand and wait.

#

In the late morning light, gray clouds scatter across the sky, filtering the sun. Sara sits on the family's new porch, book in hand, and overlooks the water. The lake is so big, so colossal, that it disappears on the horizon into a blue haze. The air is cold, a solid fifty degrees, but the sun warms her skin, hidden behind three different layers of jackets and t-shirts. Out over the lake, miles and miles away, it is raining. The clouds linger, hovering, bringing nothing but shadows and caresses of wet wind against her cheeks. The trees sway softly in the breeze, and birds swoop in long bursts before nestling themselves in their homes, collecting the last bits of breakfast before the storm. Above her, two eagles sweep broad strokes in the sky. Their call echoes down to her. She lets them be and they let her be. Sara goes back to her book. Deer pluck at damp grass. They walk slowly and quietly. Their hooves are as soft as rain. If they smell her,

they don't fear her. She lets them be. More clouds sweep in from the northwest. The sun is blocked more often and for longer periods of time. For the first time that day, she can feel the needles of chill. Heavy wings flap above, strong and solid. Sara looks up in time to see one of the eagles just barely clear a pine tree as he flies overhead. He is stoic and silent. The birds, the deer, and Sara all pause to admire him.

Her boys come running into the house. They are winded and their cheeks are pink from nip of the cold air. They grin victoriously from their latest adventure. Chasing foxes, she guesses. They tug and tug on her sleeves until she gets up.

"Food," they say. "Please. Just cheese."

Eli and Oli eat cheddar cheese sandwiches with the crusts cut off. Andrew scoffs, but Sara spares the ham anyway. She doesn't question the crusts anymore. She likes this cheese. Its smell is not pungent, and it doesn't make her get sick. For once, she can make Eli and Oli sandwiches without having to run to the toilet, Andrew taking over and telling the boys she merely ate something bad when they weren't looking. Eli and Oli tell her of their plan to see a bear, a real bear. They have never seen a bear before, though Sara has chased off a bear or two away from the house they left in Florida. Somehow, they are convinced that bears from the mountains are more authentic, as if Florida Bears are just generic knockoffs of the "real thing". She plucks a fallen strand of hair from the bread. Another one lost.

#

Everything Eli and Oli have experienced in Florida tells them it's not safe to swim in the water. They have spent their entire six years of life in Florida. They are experienced. They know water. They know it rains ninety-nine percent of the year. They know alligators can run forty

miles per hour on land and can swim sixty miles per hour in the water. They know sharks have a gazillion teeth, and that they grow back even sharper than before every time they lose them. They know ponds are filled with amoebas that can leak through their ears and infect their brains. They even know that snapping turtles only eat pinky toes, and can be persuaded not to if given a snack first. The boys do not trust this water. Water, real water, is supposed to be salty so that when you swallow it, you feel like you'll get sick and usually do. This water is not salty. It is not even chlorinated. It is sweet and reminds them of rain.

The boys toe the shoreline, even with their mother already waist deep into the lake. She tells them the water is safe. It is too far north for alligators. Too cold. She tells them to pay no mind to their father, who sits in the shade of a pine tree, warning them of the danger of snakes and large fish, and she promises that there are no sharks either. The boys do not believe her. The water goes on further than their eyes can see. They cannot believe there is nothing but fish in that water. But they do believe her when she tells them it's too cold for amoebas. The water is cold. Ice-cube down your back kind of cold. Still, their mother double dog dares them, and they have no choice but to get in the water. The water bites and claws its way underneath their skin, and now it is ten ice cubes instead of just one. They want to scream and run back to shore, but their mother is watching. Besides, going against a double dog dare is the ultimate form of cowardice, and they are no cowards.

#

Sara swims beside the boys. Andrew holds her hand and asks her not to. He is afraid she is too weak, afraid she will drown. But Sara waves these thoughts away. It is easier to breathe here. Quieter. Her arms extend before her, one after the other, slicing the cold water. Legs kick

and arms pull. Her face turns to gasp air. Sara kicks and pulls and pulls and kicks. Again and again. Gasps for air. Kick, pull, kick, air. It is a simple task, a reassuring one. There is nothing to do but float. But pull. But kick. But breathe. The water is best when it's cold, and this water is cold. Snow is still melting into the river that flows into the lake. Glaciers are melting and their ice-cold water seeps slowly down the mountain and stops here. The cold sends pinpricks all along her body. The water at this elevation is tough to swim in. There is no salt, and the higher elevation drags her down. It makes it harder to tread water, but she welcomes the challenge. She likes this water best.

She is weak, and her muscles are wasting, but she is a good swimmer. She kicks off the smooth wall of a rock, arms pressing against her ears, head down. She launches like a rocket, flying further and further, stiff as wood until she kicks, kicks, kicks. It is easier for her to breathe here. The air sits comfortably in her lungs. For a moment, she can forget that she had been coughing up blood, can forget the emptiness of her stomach, the rasp of her voice. She can pretend she is not dying. She dives, and angles herself for the floor, scuttling right along the edge. When Sara slows, she pulls her arms out and pushes the water from her sides. She lowers herself to the lake floor and sits. She listens to bubbles rising from her wake, watches sunlight filter through the ripples, dancing as she has been. Fish, bigger fish than she has ever seen, flicker out of her way. Her body slows, and in this deep quiet she hears her heart. Still beating, despite what the rest of her body tells it. Above her, she sees her sons' legs kicking, kicking, kicking. Kept afloat by the life vests her husband secured. They are free to roam, so long as they don't go too far out. She can hear them howling, their voices warbling through the water. Nothing needs her here, and so, for the first time in months, she can stop.

But she has to come up for air, and when she does, the world seems too harsh, too bright, too loud, too solid. Her children scream, splashing each other with ice cold water while their father scolds them, yells at them to stop. With a deep breath, she sinks back to the slimy rocky bottom and sits there. She feels the snag of her suit against splintered wood, hears the gurgle of bubbles escape from her nose. The noise from above is muffled, distant. Her family's shape just blobs against the dancing water. She closes her eyes, and listens.

#

The windows are open and a slight breeze rustles the curtains. Rain is falling, just a drizzle, and the temperature drops with it. Andrew is hesitant to keep the windows open. He is afraid rain will come in and warp the wicker furniture.

"Leave it," Sara says. The furniture will be fine.

Andrew takes the boys on a walk. They are wrapped head to foot in windbreakers. The father double checks the boys' laces, triple knots them just to be safe. Sara stays behind and rests. Andrew likes Montana. Stretches of yellow grass grow tall, unchecked. The land is either lush and wet and green or sparse and dry and yellow. Around their house, the trees are thick and birds are always fluttering this way and that throughout the day, their song filling the air and lifting his spirits. Down the lane, pine trees mark here and there, miles apart. Eagles hover on vent streams circling and circling while their wings are held taut, unbending. They are silhouetted against a dark and heavy cloud, heading east to the mountain ranges.

Andrew thinks of Florida. Of swampy, flat marshes, buzzing mosquitoes and rumbling alligators. He thinks of cranes and gulls and pelicans. He thinks of trees cut down, bulldozed and cemented over. Land first wet and sinking then hard as rock. Here a marsh and there a strip mall

parking lot. He thinks of foreclosed houses. Thinks of sinkholes and trees pushing through the cracked cement of dilapidated sidewalks. Of seeds pushing, saplings growing, roots resting in the darkness. A shoot or blade peaking from the earth and breathing air for the very time.

Andrew grew up in Michigan, but spent much of his adult life in Florida. Something about the coastal waters unnerve him. When he thinks of the beach, he thinks of stormy waters, cloudy with upturned sand. He thinks of slimy seaweed wrapping around his feet and he flinches. Despite his misgivings, he met Sara at the beach. Sara had convinced him to step in the warm, calm water of the Keys only to feel a jellyfish wrap its tendrils around his leg, waist, arm. He had moved so quickly, kicking it off him until he emerged back on shore, the red scars proof of its touch. Anything can lurk in those salty waters. He thinks of another time when he visited the Space Coast with her, ocean waves rolling over his head and clenching his eyes shut. He thinks of briny salt water leaking through his nostrils to the back of his throat. He thinks of when wave after wave came and pushed him to the sandy floor. Scratches on his arms from jagged shells. The rip ride dragging him back. He kicked and kicked until his ankle struck rock, slashed his skin but held him there, safety. When the wave let him go, he pushed off and raced for shore. Brave for maybe the first time in his thirty-six years of life. He crawled up the beach and clung to the sand as if it could ground him. He reached the shoreline just as the next wave came, pushing him against the rough rocks and shells. Finally, he stood. Weak and covered in nicks and scratches. Sara applauded his strength while he gasped for air and swore to never go in the water again.

There is no such danger here. Here, lakes are calm and without tide. Clouds hover low, hugging the bodies of Rocky Mountains surrounding the water, the peaks either hidden or rising

above the foggy curtain. Eli and Oli point and say they are walking in the clouds. On a distant mountain slope, a melting glacier shoots down a crevice. Its sound roars through the still forest. A deer bleats deeper in the woods, its fur damp and heavy in the falling rain. He's calling for his mother. Andrew worries it will draw a predator. Winter is still melting and predators are hungry and sluggish, weak. A lost fawn is perfect prey for the mountain lions. He moves his sons on, and tries to push the creature from his mind.

The road is empty and glistens in the light. No other cars have come this far up yet. They won't until the snows melt, clearing out the last of winter. Summer was making progress until yesterday, when snow fell on the mountaintops overnight. A few weeks more of winter. Walking in Montana is difficult, but worth the view. The road curves and rises. Further up, the mountain's peaks hold back the gloomy clouds and for the first time in hours the sun gleams and the skies are clear. Just a few feet in difference and Andrew can see birds dipping and racing after unseen insects. How long since they have stretched their wings in the sun? Watching them, Andrew feels as if he has been cooped up for months. Far above him, two eagles make wide sweeps, circling one another. They are too far to see clearly without binoculars, but occasionally the sun will hit them just right and the white of their heads and tail feathers flash bright. If he listens carefully he can hear them shriek to one another, a sound different from the whine of the Ospreys. It is commanding, clear. He points out the eagles to his sons, who squint their eyes trying to spot them in a sea of blue sky.

Ahead, the rumble of a snow crew's machine thrums like a heartbeat. It's no use going further. Back down past the mountain ridge, the rains start again. The sky is cloudy, and no birds fill the air. Cold raindrops plop onto Andrew's head, his lashes, his eyes. He lets them go,

slipping down beneath the collar of his sweater, his shirt, his chest. He cherishes the drops of rain, as miserable as they are. How long it has been since the father last ran in the rain, or jumped in puddles with his face tilted upwards and mouth open, singing about gumdrops.

#

By evening, the rain has dried and clumps together in wafts of fog, hovering over the damp fields of fragile grass. The last rays of sun finally disappear, and the sky is a deep indigo. The last of the birds flutter to their nests while bats begin to flit from one corner of the sky to another. The late evening brings out a peace in Andrew he is not sure he's ever known.

While Sara, Eli, and Oli sleep in the cool evening air, Andrew can't sleep. He tosses and turns with too many things on his mind. He thinks of innocuous things like the time he tripped on the stairs, breaking a case of beers he had been lugging for his friends, or the year he spoiled Christmas, having accidentally revealed the boys presents a month early. He thinks of the time he was called upon at work and forgot what day it was, said "you too" to the cashier rather than "thank you". Webs form in his head, and trap everything. All of it. All there for him to relive over and over until sleep takes him. But it won't come. It isn't until the birds sing, distant and soft at first, with a light ghost of blue tinging the windows does sleep come to rest in the corners of his eyes. It seems silly, to find peace in the safety of day like a child or an animal. Night is for the predators, who slink in the shadows.

#

Sara clings to the porcelain toilet. Her stomach is empty. She hasn't eaten anything since the night before. Still, her stomach twists and wrenches. The thick, metallic taste of bile still on her lips. Her body tells her there is more. Her body wants to scratch at her veins until she finds

the poison and rips it out. Every cell, every skin flake is screaming, dragging daggers down her arms, sides, feet. She vomits just to vomit, praying that maybe this time she'll get it out. Maybe this time her stomach will pull out the chemicals injected into her body every month. Outside the door her husband turns up the radio. Sara knows he wants to drown out the sounds of her retching.

#

In the plummeting evening air, fog hangs heavy over the lake. Andrew watches from the window, wringing his hands as it descends and presses against the windows. All around, nothing can be seen but a wall of white, appearing so thick the boys believe they can scoop the fog up and eat it. Andrew worries about boats still on the lake. Will they be ok? Will they be able to find shelter?

Andrew used to live on a Lake Erie. Boats and barges used it every day to ship goods from one place to another. When fog came, the ships blew their fog horns. He never liked the sound. It reminded him of things that lurked in the dark. The low bellows chilled him until he doubted he would ever get warm again. On that big lake, there were lighthouses, their warm lights breaking into the fog and guiding ships home. This lake does not have a lighthouse, only mountains.

Beside him, Eli and Oli tug at his pants and ask what the fog tastes like. Andrew doesn't know. Sara emerges from the bathroom and laughs the best she can.

"Go outside and try it yourselves," she says. But Andrew tells them not to. She is too free with them, always urging them to try new things no matter how scary they are. He used to like

that about her. Her always daring to go where he could not. But since her diagnosis, each appeal to the unknown feels like another way he could lose her.

“It’s dark, and they could fall,” he says. Outside, a fog horn echoes in the cold air, and the father shivers, pulling a knitted blanket around his shoulders. “There’s no telling what is out there now.”

#

In the ink-black night, Eli and Oli sneak out of the house with small steps, leaving behind the sounds of their mother’s sickness. Their father’s dock keys jingle dimly, clutched tightly in Eli’s hand. They are disappointed. Their mother told them there would be bears, real bears that snatch you up and gobble you down in seconds. But there are only deer. They had seen plenty of deer in Florida. The boys have read about lions. Lions come to watering holes in the Sahara to drink. This is not the desert, and they are not looking for lions, but bears and lions are almost the same. They are sure this is the only body of water for days. The bears will come tonight. The boat waits for the boys, bobbing happily as they approach.

#

Andrew prepares the family’s dinner. He is careful to cut the bread just right. No crusts for Eli and Oli. He and Sara will eat the fish she caught today. He had read fish is brain food. He hopes it will give her brain the energy it needs to fight off the cancer. Soon, he tells the boys, her brain will be all better, and then things will be normal again. Then they can visit Florida again, this time as tourists. He tells them they will finally go to Disney World. They will finally meet Aladdin, the boys’ personal hero. They will go on all the rides, even the fast ones. And, most importantly, he will let them stay up past their bed time, as agreed.

#

The boat's engine starts smoothly. Eli and Oli have practiced this much with their father. They stand on the cushioned sheet, stretching their limbs so that they just peek over the wheel. After a few bumps, the boys guide the small boat away from the dock. They imagine it's just like driving a go-cart. The put put of the old engine moves them slowly across the glassy surface of the lake. The boys agree tonight is a good night for bear spotting.

#

Sara's stomach settles. It's a rare moment when her head doesn't feel like splitting. Andrew sleeps in the room beyond the bathroom door. His snores blend softly with the breeze coming in their open windows. The stars outside are just coming out. She swears she's never seen the big dipper so bright before. She decides that if she's going to die anywhere, it's going to be here. Upstairs, she can see the Milky Way, its dusty shadows spread across the sky like spilled squid ink. She'd like to stay out here until the sun rises. Who knows how many more stars she'll get to see in her life?

But the breeze begins to pick up, whistling in her ears, pushing the thin, leftover strands of hair in her eyes. Behind her, she can hear loose pages flutter to the floor. It is strange to her, winds from the mountains rather than from a storm. She imagines the winds as just a slight breeze among the peaks of the nearby Mission Mountains, tumbling and falling down rugged mountain walls, gathering speed until they crash down on the lake, on them.

Now the wind is howling, ripping at the windows. She rushes to close them, straining against the wind. Finally, they are shut, and the howl of the wind is distant now. With one last peak at the stars, she shuts and fastens the doors. She pauses at her children's room and listens

through the door. The wind does not seem to bother them. Downstairs, in her and her husband's little cave of a room, the wind is not so rough. She slips into bed as gently as she can, trying not to wake her husband. He wakes anyway.

“Sorry,” she says.

Andrew shakes his head and rubs the sleep away from his eyes. Once she is settled, he wraps his arms around her. Together, they feel safe, cozy. Down the hall, their children are sleeping soundly, too far into sleep to be bothered by the persistent howl of the winds. Sara imagines what they are dreaming. She imagines foxes bright as fire and lumbering bears emerging from their dark caves, soaring eagles and osprey held high in the stubborn mountain winds.

“Are you feeling better?” Andrew peers over her shoulder. She can just barely see the glint of his brown eyes in the shadow of their room.

She nods. “Yes, thank you.” She turns to go back to sleep when her husband peers over her shoulder again.

“I’m sorry.”

She turns to him and asks what for. Andrew opens his mouth but can't find the words. He is sorry for so many things. He is sorry for not being there. He is sorry for retreating every time she gets sick or loses a hair. He's sorry for telling her she can't when she can and he's sorry for being afraid all the time. He is sorry he cannot tell his children what is happening and he is sorry he can't promise he'll be strong after she's gone. Sorry because he knows he could never hold the family together the way she does. Sara shushes him as he weeps. Without Andrew saying a word, she knows. She worries he will make her brave children afraid like he is. They will never

grow up if they are afraid. Like the fish in the lake, they grow strong when left alone. Still, she adores her worrisome husband. She will miss him, her anchor to ground her when she dared too big. The father who will keep her family strong. So she shushes him and together they imagine their plans for the next day's adventures and the day after that. They imagine their near futures. They imagine the boys growing strong without her. Sara will need to teach Andrew to let them go. Until then, she will wake up in the morning, and the morning after that. She will be woken by the fluttering steps of her sons, the clink of coffee mugs rattling against each other, the muted thud of cabinets closing. In the kitchen, her husband will prepare their breakfast, and the boys will race down the hall to wake her up.

“Good morning,” they will say. “Breakfast is ready.”

“I love you,” she tells her husband. He snores in response. And that is enough. This too, she decides, is beautiful.

#

Eli and Oli shiver as the breeze hits them. They did not think to bring blankets. They cannot understand how it can be warm in the day and cold at night. Summer in Florida is hot no matter if it's day or night. The boat has stopped its steady bobbing and rolls as waves hit its side. The boys want to go home but agree to triple dog dare each other. They dare themselves to stay until they see a bear.

The wind howls. Waves splash into the skiff, soaking them with that ten ice cube cold water. The boat tips from one end to the other, and they are reminded of the teeter-totter they left behind in their Florida back yard. With one heavy push, the boys are tossed into the water. The waves hit their faces and licks over their heads, but they are not worried. This is what they are

good at. They are world champion swimmers. They alone have beaten the monster from the deep end of the pool not once but twice. They would swim in the Olympics—they had been begged in fact, many times—but they do not wish to hurt the other swimmers' feelings. They tread water furiously until their limbs become lazy and ache. In the blackness the boat is lost. A million and million feet away. A sharp, tingling sensation grows from their toes to their hips, dragging daggers down their arms, sides, feet. Perhaps there are sharks after all. Oli sputters far to the right, attempting to swim to shore. He is already swallowing that sweet water, his nose fighting to remain above, fighting to breathe one last gulp of air. Eli tries to call out to him but when he opens his mouth, he swallows water and coughs it up. Oli dips under the water once, twice. His arms flail as he lets out a groan before his head disappears. Eli screams, and again swallows water, vomits. He fights every instinct to kick and grows still. Demanding his muscles stay tight, he pushes his body up, and head back. Arms spread out like the pelicans in Florida hovering in the thick winds. The fresh water is harder to float in than it is back home. Here, it seems as if the water pulls him down. He forces his eyes open and focuses on the sky above him, analyzing every shadow of the Milky Way like his chalk drawings after it rains, colors smeared together, swirling. He'll sleep just for now. When he wakes, he and his brother will be home again in Florida. Their mother's head will not hurt, and they'll go to Disney World and meet Prince Aladdin. They'll go on all the rides and their father will even let them stay up past their bedtime, as agreed. This is what he knows.

COME AND GONE

Route 520 is backed up bumper to bumper, and cars idle at a dead stop. Shrill horns cry over each other. Men shout. Drivers turn off their engines and get out of their cars. They peer further up the road, and see traffic for miles, exhaust rippling in the summer's heat. Above them, a helicopter circles. The blue insignia of the local WFTV Channel 9 news just barely visible in the glare of the sun.

"Well, shit." Todd slaps a weathered palm on the steering wheel of the '98 Toyota Tacoma. "Nowhere to go now." Sweat trickles down his chest, yellowing the pits of his worn cotton tee.

Josie twists in her seat and peers out the back window. Traffic ahead and behind, and nothing but marshland and thick forests of scrub palms to their left and right.

"We should have left earlier." Josie pulls out their wrinkled map, and scans for the closest exit. She knew they should have left a day ago, when Category 4 Lucia first turned for Florida, and the weathermen started predicting a path straight through the peninsula, starting at the Space Coast and carving through the panhandle. The first real hurricane in seven years. "We should have packed and moved out before the governor called for a mandatory evacuation, Todd."

The governor urged everyone in the coastal counties evacuate south, or at the very least, to the center of the state where newscasters hoped the storm would lose strength. But Todd insisted they were fine, as he has always done for thirty years. He spent the weekend drilling sheets of plywood across their brick home's windows, as if the wood was going to do them any

good. Josie woke up night after night to nightmares of tree branches crashing through. A big enough piece of debris wasn't going to be stopped by just an inch or two of cheap wood. "It wouldn't have made a difference. People have been evacuating for days now." Todd pulls the key from the ignition and swings the door open.

"Orlando isn't for another twenty miles. What if we get caught in the storm?" Josie follows Todd and climbs out of the Ford. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she eyes a band of clouds hanging over the marshes. The more she stares, the more the clouds seem to move, though she can't tell which way. She shakes her head and breaks her gaze before folding the map and fanning herself against the heat. Early September and the humidity is stifling as bands from the coming hurricane filter in and out across miles of Florida marshes. The only relief the rain offers is a temporary break from the love-bugs.

Todd walks around the car and curses under his breath. A large mass of love-bug guts mar the truck's now speckled finish. Josie looks out over the marshes. Palms and shrubs and nothing but swamps and the musty smell of wet earth. Above them, buzzards circle hot air vents. Heavy gray clouds linger on the horizon. Every now and then they release a low roll of thunder. Josie watches the clouds cautiously, convinced they are the hurricane no matter what Todd says. Todd walks to the end of the truck and sits in the open-faced bed of the truck. "Just storms, Jos. The outer bands. We still have two days till it gets here. If we're lucky, she'll swing off the coast. Those weather people don't know a thing."

Normally, Josie would agree with him. She and Todd used to joke that the weather channel should just announce the chance of rain as fifty-fifty. Either it was going to rain or it wasn't. Leave your umbrella at home at your own risk. Only when it was raining would the

number climb to one hundred. But something about the urgent looming of a hurricane suddenly made all her senses alert. The past few days, she spent her days listening for gusts of wind that sounded unusually heavy, flinched at the creaking of a tree branch, and paused at the lightest sensation of rain in the air. She tuned into the news hourly, marked updates on a pad of paper, sighed with relief when the storm models projected the hurricane swinging out to sea and tensed when they showed the storm pivoting towards the coast. The image of the multi-colored swirling mass was a constant on her laptop and television screen. Because of all this, Josie cannot take her eyes off the clouds.

“What if the traffic never moves? What if it hits us while we’re stuck here?”

“The traffic will move. It has to.” Todd’s voice is insistent, but to Josie, not enough consideration goes into his answers.

“What if we run out of gas?”

“We won’t at this rate.”

“What if we break down?”

Todd shrugs. “There’s no use in worrying until it happens. For now, all we can do is wait.”

Todd’s answers surprises Josie. Todd is not a Type B kind of person. Todd is the kind of man who swerves in traffic to find the shorter lane. He is the kind of man who will sigh repeatedly when the grocer takes too long to bag his purchases. He is the kind of man to shout and rage at the slightest inconvenience. Josie is comfortable with that. She married Todd because he would rage when she would merely accept. Things got done when Todd was around, and it was a lifestyle she had become accustomed to. But no matter what Josie says now, Todd

dismissed her as if he's still at home without a cloud in the sky. His inaction makes her fidgety. She cannot just sit. Hoping, to wear off the jitters, Josie walks down the line of cars.

#

Josie returns from her walk, her back drenched in sweat, just as a flash of red and blue lights approach from the opposite lane of traffic. Todd jumps to his feet, ecstatic at the sight of law enforcement. The cruiser parks to the side of the road, and two officers depart from the car. Todd and Josie join a crowd of anxious drivers and huddle around the officers, shouting questions and pleas for help.

"Listen." One of the officers steps forward. He is younger, boyish. His hands rest on his belt, feet spread to gain authority. The crowd silences. "What you all have here is a mess of a traffic jam. Too many cars ahead have run out of gas. Until we can get a tow truck out here. You're not going anywhere. And Lucia, she's just off the coast. Now there's a campsite for RVs and campers just at the next exit. I know you all were hoping to get out of the path of this thing, but the roads are too far backed up for that to happen. There's only one way you're getting off this road, and it's heading to that campsite. There are toilets, running water, and a park ranger's office. You'll have the basic amenities."

The crowd stares in silence before a wave of confusion and anger bursts. Todd moves forward but Josie pulls him back, shaking her head.

"We're moving this traffic so folks can get this road to safety. If that plan's not to your liking, you're free to stay. We can't stop you. Those leaving should take the shoulder."

Todd and Josie elbow their way out of the crowd and make their way back to the Toyota. The news leaves Todd in silence, but Josie takes the information with relief.

“Well? Let’s go, Todd. At least we won’t be in the open.”

“You heard him. We’re still stuck in her path.”

Josie frowns at him and gestures to the marshes.

“It’s either here or there. What would you prefer?”

Todd grunts and pulls the Tacoma’s keys out of his pocket.

#

The RV campsite, much to Josie’s relief, is heavily wooded. The park rangers assure the crowd that the trees will block most of the wind and absorb most of the rain. With luck, they’ll be safe from flooding. Josie inspects the tree branches, and finds them strong. She is satisfied they won’t break off. That afternoon, the crowd naps in their cars, their windows down for air though the humidity is thick enough to smother. Josie’s thick hair curls and frizzes, and when she touches it her hand gets trapped in tangles. Josie thought she might have been able to sleep, finally able to forget about the clouds lost in the bramble of tree branches, but mosquitoes are drawn out and she swats the bugs away to no avail. The high-pitched whine fills her ears and she swears the sound will drive her mad. Outside, something rummages through the brush, creeping quietly except for the snap of twigs, and *thunk* of rocks. She stills her breath and listens, willing herself to hear the heavy thud of feet, the loud breath of an animal, a predator. She imagines a bear, a Florida panther, a wolf, perhaps. Or was she being silly? Maybe it was a deer, a raccoon, or a boar. Either way she is too terrified to look. Todd snores peacefully beside her, unbothered.

“Todd.” Josie hisses, tugging at his arm.

Todd snorts as he sits upright. “What is it?”

“There’s something outside the car.”

Todd throws a glance outside before rolling his eyes and lying back down. “It’s an animal, Josie. Let it be.”

Outside, the animal rips at grass. Josie squeezes her eyes shut and begs to fall asleep, to forget about this thing right outside her door. Again, a snort, though this time she’s positive it’s not Todd. The animal steps closer, one, two steps. Josie grabs a half empty water bottle from her cup holder and tosses it out the window, landing with a hard crash through the underbrush. Whatever gathered outside startles, and forces its way back through the shrubs.

#

When Josie wakes, the air is cool. Cooler than it should be. Cooler than she can ever remember in September. Distant thunder rumbles, loud and booming. Finally, she can see it. The threatening clouds grouped tight together, lightning on its edges, and above it, purple sky. The hurricane. According to the radio, Lucia is still ranked as a category four, which worries storm trackers as Lucia absorbs the warm waters of the coast. No matter the ranking, Lucia is here. Staring them down, the threat in sight. In all the years Josie has lived in Florida, she has never seen one coming right at her. Only the overhead images from the satellites. They always seemed so unreal then. Just a swirl of clouds arching their way across the ocean. Come and gone in a matter of a few hours. But these winds whipping her hair against her face are real, growing stronger and stronger as the hours pass. Josie climbs up the hood of the truck, her sweaty bare feet slipping and burning against the smooth red paint, desperate to get a better look. Josie climbs down to find Todd in the cab fiddling with the radio.

“What are you doing?”

Todd wipes a curtain of sweat from his brow. “Hurricane update. She’s still a four, and rotating tighter than ever.”

“But we’ll be ok, right?”

Todd shakes his head and returns to the radio. Josie’s not sure if it’s the heat or her eyes, but she swears she saw her husband’s hands shaking, even if only a little. His vulnerability shocks her, and more than anything she wants to hold him, protect him.

Outside their car, the winds and rain pick up. It is clear to everyone that the storm has arrived and no one is quite sure what to do. With one last look at Todd’s shaking hands, Josie swallows her fear and hops out of the truck and approaches the other drivers.

“No matter what, we should stick together.” She points to the edges of the park, lined with scrub bushes and pine trees. A good enough shelter as any. She takes the keys from Todd and pulls the Ford right against the tree line. The other cars follow suit, creating a block of cars similar to the one on 520. They rest as close as they can to one another, and for the first time in days, Josie feels sure they are safe. Josie thinks of the cars that stayed behind, locked in traffic on the state road, and hopes they have found shelter. She imagines cars sitting abandoned in the middle of the state road. Projectiles just waiting to happen. But there is nothing she can do about them. That night, they wait with their windows rolled up.

#

Josie wakes to total darkness and the splattering of rain against the windshield. It pours down in sheets, a wall of water pounding against their truck. Wind whistles and rattles against the windows, rocking the car ever so gently against the neighboring pine. Despite the truck being still intact, Josie feels uneasy. At least at home she could hide behind walls and boards and actual

doors. Here, all that blocks them from the winds outside is a thin sheet of metal that can crumple upon impact with another car at sixty miles per hour. Josie tries not to think about the strength of the winds outside. She looks to Todd, expecting to find him fast asleep, but the seat next to her is empty.

“Todd?”

“Here.” Todd sits behind her, squeezed between the back bench of the cab and her seat. Todd holds his hand out for her, and Josie takes it. She steps over the middle compartment and settles onto the bench, her face next to Todd’s. In the dim light, she sees him staring straight ahead, out the truck’s little window. The pines above them creak heavily in the wind, and Todd tenses.

“You’re afraid.”

“Yes.”

The thought strikes Josie as funny. In all their thirty years together Josie has never seen him afraid. She wonders, just a moment, if he had always been afraid and only put on a gruff face for her. If so, then she could be brave for him.

Josie sits up and motions for Todd to sit with her, to rest his head on her lap. He does so, and she brushes her fingers through his thinning hair. They cannot both be afraid. Their dynamic works because each has their own role. Josie breathes in deeply, and summons a brave face.

“Close your eyes.” She places her hand on his heart, feels it beating fast against his ribs. “What if the road floods?” Todd’s whisper is barely audible against the winds, and breaks off at the end. Sitting this close, Josie can see Todd’s face is weathered by faint wrinkles and large, splotchy freckles. His eyebrows are bushy and flecked with grey. But hearing his voice waver

makes Josie think of a child. They had been through hurricanes before, but always from the safety of their home. Many were just category threes, if that. Josie and Todd would wave away the weatherman's concern and open a beer as they watched the storm roar through their backyard. At worst, they worried about shingles flying off or the old oak tree in the back being uprooted. They never had anything more than a day or two without power.

"We'll be fine."

"You were right," Todd says. "A big enough piece of debris can't be stopped by a few inches of plywood." He is pointing now out the window, pointing at the cars left out in the middle of the lot.

"Hush now." Josie cradles Todd's head and brushes his hair until his breaths grow deeper. "It'll be come and gone within a day."

FAMILIARS

My sister Sylvie and I are all ready to go out with Dad. It's Saturday, our day. Just the three of us. We wear our best play clothes and even our shoes are tied. We've cleaned our shared room, and have taken out the trash. Our chores are done and Sylvie has brushed out her hair the way Dad tells her even though she doesn't like it. Her corkscrew curls are unrecognizable and her hair flows out from her head like frizzy waves. And me, I have pushed down the cowlick at the top of my head with tape. I have determined this is the only way it will stay. Dad is checking the last of his emails when his phone rings. It's a tone my sister and I know well. The high piercing whistle is assigned to Lydia; the blonde woman Dad sees. Dad first introduced us to Lydia three months ago, after they had been dating for some time. Dad said he wanted to wait until he was sure. He didn't want to hurt us. Sylvie and I wish he never even bothered. The night we met Lydia, he set out the table for four, the first it's been in years. Dad at one end, Lydia at the other. My sister and me in between, angry there was a woman in our Mom's chair. Over dinner, Lydia said we were lovely. But she said it the way someone would slap a ruler on a bug. We knew what that meant. We've gone for walks in the parks since, but we always find ways to stay out of her reach.

Today is our day but Dad picks up, and we know what will happen. We hear him try to tell her we're just about to leave, but we know he isn't really trying. Sylvie, older than me by two years, says it's because he's lonely, and it's something only other adults can fix. I don't understand why we can't. When Dad hangs up, he kneels in front of us, wearing his apologetic face that's become a permanent setting.

“Sorry, guys. Can we reschedule for next week?”

“Just go.” Sylvie and I run to our room, our sanctuary.

We’ve given up trying, we know no matter how much we kick and scream, he’ll call the woman next door to keep an eye on us. So we shut our door, leaving it just an inch or two open, and play quietly while the woman who smells like meatballs watches Dr. Phil on our pleather couch.

Sylvie plops down on her bed and opens the latest American Girl magazine. Mom promised Sylvie a doll for her eighth birthday, mom’s thin fingers shaking as she pointed to each doll to gauge Sylvie’s reaction. There are still pinpricks from all the pages she tacked to the wall. All the pages Sylvie tore down. When mom died, just two weeks before my sister’s birthday, I was six. Things like disease barely exist to six year olds. My sister, in all her eight years of wisdom, was the one to explain that death is never coming back. She knew dad was hurting. He did his best during those first few months, but even I could see him he needed help. Sylvie took up mom’s jobs in order to keep any newcomers away. She combed my hair and taught me to tie my shoes. It wasn’t like mom but it was something. She doesn’t have time to think about dolls anymore.

Sylvie pretends not to care that we’ve been stood up again, but I know. When she’s upset, she furrows her brow. When Mom was still alive, mom would always tell Sylvie she’d look like an old lady by the time she was fifteen. Sylvie is ten now, and she doesn’t look old yet. Not to me. But her brow is furrowed and I’m worried if she does become an old lady she’ll leave me.

“Let’s be witches.” I say, begging her to agree.

“Guys can’t be witches. You’re a wizard. Or a warlock. Like Merlin.”

“I want to be a witch.”

She sighs and says I can be the first male witch. She doesn't know what I'll wear though. She reaches into the dresser, the one that's used for storage, and drapes herself in Mom's black dress, the one from the 70s, with sleeves that reach out half a foot and a skirt that flutters in the wind. It's still too big on my sister, but with tape and some string we manage to hold back the skirt so that it only just bunches at her feet and the sleeves hang off her shoulders like streamers, giving her the look that she is boiling in a sea of black cloth. Wherever she walks, her skirt trails behind her. I squeeze her old witch's hat from Halloween onto her head, and even though it flops over I swear I've never seen anything witchier. We drape her in costume jewelry, choosing blacks and silvers until she is the lavish witch of her dreams. Now it is my turn, and my sister pulls out the black pants and long sleeved tees. But I want more. I pull out the black skirt from her closet.

“That's for girls.”

But I pull it over my legs anyway. The elastic waist clings to my jeans. It fits. Grabbing the broom from the laundry room, I fly down the halls, skirt billowing behind me while my sister chants spells over a cauldron of empty shoe boxes. The woman who smells like meatballs chuckles, and we think maybe she's not so bad. After a good ride through our domain, I make my sister promise we'll be witches for the rest of our lives. And no matter who comes or goes, whether dad marries Lydia or if we finally bring mom back, like the way I've dreamed for two years, we'll live deep in the mountains brewing potions and living with our cat familiars. We'll run with the wolves and dance with the bears, casting spells on all those who dare to break our solitude. We pinky promise and swear to our witch ancestors. We're sure we have at least some. We will be our own familiars, each one bound to the other. And never will we ever part.

SIX MATCHES

June remembers being seven the first time she lit a match. The memory of the rough, rasping drag of the match against the gray striker of her father's grocery store matchbook brings chills to her spine. She closes her eyes and envisions the hollow roar as flame engulfs the red tip of the match. She loved volunteering to light the candles on cakes, the more candles the better. But the people around her always urged her to hurry. They didn't want wax to fall on the cake, and her parents feared she would burn herself. It wasn't until June was nineteen when she was finally able to take her time examining the match as it burned. June struck a new match again and again, analyzing the way the tip burned black and flaked away, leaving nothing but the charred scrap of wood. She'd watch the slight waiver of flame against the breeze of her fan until the smoke filled her college dorm room and activated the sprinkler. Fifty dollars' worth of matches lost, and a warning that another incident would kick her out of college housing. Next time, she remembered to wrap the smoke alarm in plastic, the way she saw on YouTube, securing the edges with masking tape from the local shipping store. June was never caught again. She was careful.

June lives with her sister April now, in a small single-wide mobile home, paid for by their late parents' inheritance. April and June are just four years apart in age, a fact that seems to be engrained in April. April, as the oldest, built her life around protecting and looking out for June. But this time, it's April who needs help. April is eight months pregnant and up until now has been living on her own. The baby's father left months ago, but April isn't bothered. All she needs is help. April is large enough to be carrying twins, and as such, April can barely find the energy to finish a load of laundry by day's end, nonetheless bend over enough to even pick the

laundry out of the dryer. As a thank you for April's kindness, June agrees to temporarily live with April and subleases her apartment to some college kids that don't mind the burnt-out carpet. Neither June nor April are sure how long this stay will last. Somedays, April says until the baby comes, but June knows she'll need help even then. Especially then. For now, it's June's job to keep April off her feet. June runs around the house, balancing chores with providing April with tall glasses of iced water. Anything to keep April from overheating in the humidity.

Mid-summer and Florida is in the middle of a month-long drought. Temperatures soar and the crew on the weather channel take to frying eggs on the street. April's single-wide mobile home runs on a single window air conditioner, and it gave out two days ago. June and April drape themselves in damp rags in the kitchen. Their sole fan whirls on high, set on the kitchen counter to cool them off. Bea, April's four-year-old English Pointer lays flush against the black and white diner linoleum seeping whatever chill she can from the faded flooring. April squats, legs spread as far as she can, and lays a damp sheet over Bea with her free hand.

"There, girl." She drops a few ice cubes in Bea's water bowl to be safe.

June watches from the Formica table with a frown. "You shouldn't move like that. You could pop at any moment. What if your water broke?"

"Then we'd go to the hospital." April lowers herself onto a plastic fold out chair across from June.

"Not in this heat."

"If Joe says it's time to go, it's time to go." April pats her stomach, and lays a wet washcloth across her bulging belly.

"I'm staying."

April shoots June a glare and sips the melted ice water remains of her iced tea. June pulls her matchbook from her shorts pocket, rips out a match and lashes it against the striker. A small flame bursts from the head, and June flips it in her hand.

“Don’t.” April reaches out, grabbing for the matches. “It’s hot enough without you starting a fire in here.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not.” April beckons with her hand again until June assents, dunking the match in her sister’s tea and slipping the matchbook into April’s hand.

April pushes herself up and sets the matchbook on the top of the fridge before sitting down again. “I want you to get out more. I think you’re ready. Come with me to church. We volunteer at the soup kitchen after. It’ll be good for you.”

“But what about all that talk about fire and brimstone? You sure it won’t stir up any embers?” June flashes a grin at April.

April flings her wet towel into June’s face.

“You’ll be fine.”

June’s knees bump against her sister’s. Last night her elbow knocked a plate off the small, fold-up table. Since then, she has kept her arms glued to her sides. Over April’s shoulder, a small portable TV flashes the local four o’clock news on mute. A break-in at a jewelry store in Palm Bay. A man in Deland won the lotto. An outbreak of crimes against the homeless in Cocoa. A woman brings her cats to a hospital as therapy pets at Parrish. June watches the way the news anchor smiles one minute and brings tears to her eyes not twenty seconds later.

“What kind of monster can smile like that?”

“What?”

“That woman. There.” June points as the news anchor once again bursts into a smile. A laugh now.

“It’s her job, June.”

June continues to stare at the woman until they segue to the weather. A severely pregnant woman lines out the next few days, with highs in the nineties and a UV index in the low teens throughout the week.

Bea whines, nails clicking on the tile as she takes her stand next to the back door.

“I’m coming, Bea.” April places her free hand on the back of the chair and pushes herself up, belly first.

“Don’t. I’ll walk Bea. You stay here. Put your feet up.”

April sighs in relief, and waddles straight to the bathroom, her favorite spot to cool off ever since the A.C. died.

With April gone, June swipes the matchbook from the top of the fridge and stows it back in her pocket. She grabs Bea’s leash from the Bea’s pile of toys and attaches it to her collar.

“See you soon, Bea,” April calls from the bathroom, her voice echoing as if she’s in a tunnel.

Bea woofs in response and pulls June out the door. The sun is a blinding white, and beetles screech from neighboring oaks. Bea drags June along the patches of grass to the small plot of woods just a thirty yards past April’s trailer. Each blade of grass is hot and scratching against June’s bare feet but it’s still better than the blacktop. In the woods, the ground is a mix of sand and pine needles, each equally burning into the soles of June’s feet. She takes quick, sharp

steps, urging her feet to touch less, fly more. Finally, Bea is satisfied with a visit to her favorite tree. The live oak is older than June knows. It towers over them so high June must bend her back to see the tallest branches. Feet and feet of Spanish moss dangle towards them, blowing gently in the dusty wind. Red lichen spots its way back down to the ground until it reaches the trunk, something June is sure would take at least five of her to wrap her arms around.

Bea pees and pees. At least she is hydrated. June perches herself on a knot of wood emerging from the ground and wrinkles her nose at the smell of Bea's pee against hot, burning sand. Finally, Bea is done and June can tell Bea is proud of her newly marked territory. Tongue wagging, Bea lets out a woof and pulls June down one of her favorite trails. It's shaded here, and June is appreciative of Bea's taste. Rows and rows of small, stubby palms line the path, and June takes care to step over each dried palm frond. From here, she can just barely make out the mobile home community, her sister's own box resting on the outer edge. The pea-green shutters they drilled on in the spring are already flaking, and the flowers April planted have long since shriveled. Still, she goes out twice a day and waters them. To give them a fighting chance, she always says. April's lawn is the only one in the damn mobile community to hold out hope against the heat, even when dried out palm fronds caught fire and burned out the remains of their backyard.

The mobile home is home simply because her sister dares not risk something more expensive while June can get ahold of a match. Their own family had been forced out of their home when the girls were just small things. A hand towel carelessly thrown onto the stove that everyone swore hadn't been on. The firefighters deemed it an accident, and the family was left to figure out what to do with the mess. The kitchen was completely charred, the cracked tile coated

in soot like dust. Their parents let the girls see the kitchen one last time before the renovations began. It was to be a lesson to them, meant to instill a fear and respect for fire. That night, after their parents tucked them in and kissed them goodnight, April leaned over the edge of the bunkbed and made June promise to never set fires inside the house again.

June didn't know how April knew. She was careful to do it when she was sure no one was looking. She asked if April would tell. She was young and terrified her parents would no longer love her if they knew how much she enjoyed the heat of the fire warming her face as she watched the towel catch flame and sat by as the fire crept its fingers up the wall like the ivy on their backyard fence.

"I won't," April said. She said it so solemnly for a twelve-year-old. Even then, the force behind the statement instilled a belief in June that her sister would bear all her secrets, all because they loved each other.

June pulls out the matchbook out of her pocket and flips the cover, considering the six remaining matches. Bea noses June's knee, signaling she is ready to go. June sighs and places the matchbook back into her pocket. Leash in hand, they trot back over the sand.

#

June finds the soup kitchen all very boring. A long line of ragged men and women shuffle along the scuffed linoleum floor. Some lower their eyes as they wait for their tray to be handed over to them. Others watch with eager eyes, following the server's every movement. Their faces are gaunt, and June can't tell if it's starvation or the overhead halogen lighting that draws out the shadows in their faces. All June has to do is say hello. Pour soup. Give bread. Smile. Say hello. Pour soup. Give bread. Smile. But April is watching from the station next to her and seeing June

do something good seems to make April happy, so June plasters on a smile and says “Hi!” as brightly as she can to each visitor. June pours the soup with flourish, sloping a bit over the side so that it burns her thumb. It’s nothing, but the lead volunteer sends her into the back to run it under cool water and bandage it up. Still, it’s a break from April’s constant gaze, so she goes. The kitchen itself is more or less what she expected. Stainless steel appliances line the walls and dishes are piled a mile high in the cluttered sink waiting for someone to get to them. In case the lead volunteer is listening, June runs the water and watches it flood the bowls. Bits of broccoli, small slabs of ham, and god knows what else circle down the drain. Looking around, June cannot find the first aid box. She wanders past an industrial freezer, chained and locked shut. Crates of chips line the walkways, and an unopened bag of multicolor sponges slumps in a corner. And then she sees it. The gas stove left unattended, soup simmering on low. The flame just a whisper of blue flecked with white. Four burners and just a simple knob to increase or decrease the heat. June scoots towards it, one step at a time, and looks around. No one is watching. Just past the door, a man in a worn-down coat is making April laugh. The other volunteers laugh along with her. June places her hand on the stove’s dial. Just a nudge. Nothing bad will happen if she moves it just a nudge. She twists the bottom left burner’s dial just an inch. Not satisfied, she twists the upper and lower right burner’s dials as well. One by one, she watches the flames lick over the edges of the pan and smiles as the fire’s orange tendrils crawl bit by bit up the pot’s sides. Her wrist turns again. Another nudge. She feels the heat bask against her skin, feels it press against the fibers of her shirt and breathes in the dry, acrid smell of hot metal. June places her free hand against her pant pocket and outlines the paper cover of the matchbook beneath the fabric. Six matches left.

“June!” April snatches June’s hands away from the burner, quickly turning the burners to off before turning to face her sister. April has that look again. Panic. Betrayal. June did it again. She failed. June wants her to say it. She imagines the words bubbling up April’s throat, twisting into knots on her tongue and jumping from her lips into the air where she can no longer take them back. But instead April slaps her, a quick sharp one, right across June’s cheek. And June is stunned. It is the first time April has ever hit her.

Before June can say anything, April grabs a towel and wraps it around June’s hand. April drags her to the front, to the volunteers, and blabs some fake excuse about a cut. After a few reassurances, they are out the door and in her sister’s worn down Ford.

“Buckle your seatbelt.” April twists the keys in the car’s ignition, yanks her belt strap down and pulls the gearshift into drive.

June fumbles with her seatbelt, clicking it into place just as April makes a sharp turn onto US-1.

“Sis, I’m sorry.”

April says nothing, eyes glaring at the road and mouth set into a deep frown that furrows the sides of her mouth. June remembers their mom doing the same thing. Whenever she or April displeased her, their mom would frown and not say a word the whole ride home. June sighs and leans against the door. Her hand twitches to her pocket and she thinks of the warmth of the burners against her face.

“Is that the first time?”

June jumps in her seat. She didn’t expect her sister to break the silence, so she has to ask what April said again.

“Have you done anything else?” They brake at a light but April refuses to look at June. She watches the light as if it might turn at any moment even though they both know they have a few minutes before it changes.

“No, that’s it. I swear.” June tries to bring the solemnity that April had in her voice when she was twelve. Anything to placate her sister, anything to earn her trust again.

Her sister breathes a sigh of relief, shoulders sagging.

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?”

“Sis, it’s not. It’s me. I saw the stove and I-”

“No.” Finally, April turns to her. “I mean back then, when we were kids. If I told on you then, maybe we could have gotten you some help.”

June can’t speak. Fifteen years and April has been her home base, the safety net who would always catch her, always say I forgive you, and you’ll do better. This change hurts deep, and in a fit of bitter rage June lashes out.

“Yeah,” she says, “it is.”

#

That evening, April still refuses to speak to June. Nearly twelve hours of silence since June’s last remark and April’s disapproval rings like a high pitch whine in June’s ears. In the silence, Bea’s nails clink against the checkered linoleum, greeting June with a loud woof. Behind her, April approaches with a leash.

“I’ll take her.” June grabs Bea’s leash and attaches it to the dog’s collar.

“No. I’ll go.” April’s hand is outstretched, reaching for the leash, and June can see she’s still angry with her.

“Let me do this.” They stare at each other before April nods consent.

“Be back in ten minutes or I’m coming after you.”

“Twenty. You know Bea likes walks.”

April nods again, and the two run out the door. Bea pulls at the leash, tongue lolling as she kicks up sand in a mad dash for her favorite tree.

The long shadows over the mobile community have cooled the sand. Mosquitos hover above them, easing in closer and closer until all June hears is the high pitched shrill of their wings. Bea thumps her tail every time one lands on her. The woods are quiet as birds begin to settle in. Occasionally, she spots an early bat swooping between trees and picking at the clouds of gnats. Finally relieved, Bea sniffs the air and cocks her head. June figures it’s just a passing deer when she hears the unmistakable whoop of someone nearby. Just some kids trying to cut lose on a hot night. She’s seen the shattered bottles hidden in the brush. She doesn’t care what they do so long as they don’t bother her. Bea, however, grows still. Tail stiff, she lifts her left paw before bouncing off in the direction of the voices.

“Bea! Shit.” Hopping over fallen trunks and branches, June gives chase to Bea. The last thing she needs is Bea getting lost. April would never forgive her.

Up ahead a group of boys, high school maybe, crowd in a tight circle off the path. Bea, happy to have found more friends, lets out a loud woof. The boys startle and disperse at the sight of June, dropping a bat as they run. Bea mistakes the boys’ fear for play and runs after them, barking happily.

“Bea!” June calls after her but the dog is gone. Her barking is distant within seconds as she chases down her new friends. “Damn dog.”

June eyes the clearing. She's never wandered this far before. Small trails mark animal paths through the brush, and among the overgrowth, a man. The man from the soup kitchen, the one who made April laugh. His hair is matted and unwashed, beard flecked with streaks of mud and crumbs. Fresh blood oozes like water from beneath his hairline. His clothes are worn down, bleached by the sun and ridden with holes. Blood stains seep through his shirt, sticky and hot and wet. The skin around his face is already swelling, and bruises form around his eyes and neck. Beside him, a broken plank of wood, run through with blood soaked nails. Little bits of debris cling to it, stringy and pink and June can't bear to look at it any closer. She reaches out, fingers shaking, to the spot just below the man's jaw. He is warm, but lifeless. Her breath catches in her throat and she draws back, tripping on a rotting log. June doesn't want to see him like this. She didn't know him; she didn't even speak to him. It was just chance that she even saw him. But seeing this, the blood blotting his jacket, the flies drawn to his wounds, it's revolting. Bile rises in June's throat, thick and bitter. She swallows hard, fighting it back. Now isn't the time. She can't let April see. It's unlikely April will ever come out this far but she's always pushing to do more chores, to be more active. April would be heartbroken if she saw this. The man made her smile, laugh even, when June can't even be reliable enough for April to rely on. Looking around her, June spots a palm frond, fallen branches, scrub bushes. The perfect kindling. It will be a sort of funeral pyre, just enough to burn the man. If there's anything June can do, it's this. June stands and gathers the debris into a pile around the man. June fumbles with the pocket to her jeans, pulls out the matchbook she's been fingering for weeks. It takes three matches before the fire takes. June grabs a palm frond and holds it to the match and lets it burn. She lays the burning frond on the pile surrounding him, and gathers more kindling. Fallen pine nettles and oak leaves

spark fast. The soft wind from the coast feeds and nurses the young fire. She adds her own breath, cupping her hands along the bundle of shrubs as she breathes humid air into it until the fire grows and burns her hands. Palms stinging red, she drops the mass onto the prepared fire, pokes holes into it with a fallen branch, and flaps fronds into its mouth. Anything to make it grow. Anything to burn.

Behind her, Bea is barking and beneath that, June can hear someone trying to shoo Bea away. June remembers the bat and walks through the brush. Not far from the fire, June finds Bea licking the face of a boy, seventeen maybe. The way his leg is resting, June thinks it might be broken. He's crying hot wet tears, holding his hands up to her. Help, he says. She is angry. She wants to punch him, wants to yell and scream. This boy was with the other kids, part of the group that killed the man. She wants to tell the boy about how the man made her sister smile. But then the pain in the boy's face changes to something else. He's no longer looking at her but behind her. She turns, expecting to see April, and instead she finds the fire.

The fire has spread. She wanted to give the man a funeral, the best she could anyway, and now the fire is climbing its way up the pine trees, feasting on dried fronds, and spreading all thanks to her. For a moment, June closes her eyes and breathes deeply. The salty smelly of smoke seeps into her lungs. She savors it. The heat from the fire creeps into her face. And then Bea, barking again, frightened by the flames. The boy, unable to stand on his own. The fire will spread. Before long, April will see the fire.

“Lead the way, Bea.”

Bea runs in the direction of the mobile community, barking all the way. June moves to follow when the boy cries for her to stop, to help.

June looks at the boy, weighing her options. Help him, and June will be slowed down. The clearing around them is a meal for such a fire, and the flames devour everything in their path. There's no guarantee either of them will escape. But if June leaves now, she and Bea escape in time to warn April. June will explain it was an accident that, she didn't mean to cause the fire this time. April may not believe her but at least they'll have time to escape.

June shakes her head and runs after Bea, but she hesitated for too long. Bea, wherever she is, is long gone, and June is unfamiliar with this part of the woods. Whatever she did recognize is burning.

"Bea!" June shouts for help, but her voice is drowned by the roar of the fire. June follows a path she thinks she recognizes, but all she finds are pines, burning. She gazes over the skyline for the highest branches of Bea's favorite oak, but the smoke obscures her view. The forest is too dry, and the fire caught too quickly. In the twilight glow, the fire leaps through the branches like lava. As soon as April sees the flames she'll know what June did. Hopefully she won't wait around this time. April has spent too much time hoping June will get better. She needs to move on, without June. The smoke rises quickly, shades of reds, grays, oranges looming over the city. The smoke catches the wind and blows west, blanketing across the sky as the last of the dying sun's rays illuminate it into a burst of blazing reds and oranges. It almost looks as if the sky is burning.

THEIR ORBITS

The rented cabin is cozy, barely bigger than Franny's studio apartment back in Titusville, and made of thick logs older than her grandfather. Situated deep in the mountains surrounding Denver, nothing but acres of forests and birds. The cabin was her boss' idea.

"Mandatory vacation," he said.

Franny scoffed, remembering how her boss had phrased it.

"Overworked."

She balked at that, and threatened to file a complaint at human resources. After a terse, unproductive meeting with HR, he convinced her. Or rather, encouraged her. Paid leave, and her job waiting for her when she came back, however long that took. The idea seemed absurd. She needed to recalibrate, not rest. Six months of code burst into flame. She was lucky, they told her. It was only a satellite, only funds were lost. It landed in the middle of the Pacific, no one was injured. But Franny had done the math. She knew the cost of every part of that satellite, knew the funding required to even get it off the ground. NASA's space program was already fighting for every dime. Each accident, each unnecessary loss earning a black mark in the government's log books. How could they promise her job when the program could very well be gone in months, and her mistake the last straw? He told her to forget it. To move on. To learn from her error, a single misplaced digit. At the cabin, she would be able to think.

"When's the last time you slept?" He asked her, his ironed suit in stark contrast with the white walls of his office.

"How does that matter?" She replied, maybe a little too sharply.

The woman from HR coughed gently, and placed a hand on Franny's shoulder.

“We’re worried about you, Franny.”

Together, they discussed the benefits of getting away. They talked about the quiet of the woods, the lack of people. The more she listened, the more she was sure her boss only wanted to get rid of her. Away from people? Did they want to make her disappear? To make this scandal, this black mark on their program disappear? It would be easier with her gone, sure. Her boss could calmly tell the press that the person responsible had been fired, and maybe then the stakeholders’ outrage would settle, thinking this kind of thing would never happen again, thinking that Franny deserved to be laid off. Maybe she did. She gave in.

#

Franny was nervous the entire four hours it took for her Southwest flight to arrive in Denver. When the seatbelt sign was on, Franny chewed her nails to nubs and did her best to focus on the seat in front of her. When the pilot announced they could walk about the cabin, she tripped over the aisle seat in her hurry to get out. But now where? She walked up and down the aisle, pacing until a stewardess with a bright smile stopped her and asked if she was ok.

“What if we crash?” Franny asked her.

The stewardess laughed, and assured her there would be no such thing, but Franny noticed how the woman’s smile grew just a fraction of an inch wider.

“It’s possible,” Franny insisted, “my satellite crashed. I didn’t think it would crash.”

The smile didn’t move an inch, but the stewardess caught the eye of a large man sitting by an exit door and motioned to Franny. The conversation ended with her seat being moved next to the Air Marshal and a vodka tonic sweating in her hand. After the flight, the man escorted her off the plane.

The taxi ride was no better. After an hour driving through plains to the city, the driver took a small road that gradually turned into dirt. Looking out her window, Franny could see they were ascending into the mountains. Every turn made her stomach twist around itself until she broke out into a cold sweat. She tried to focus on the seat ahead of her like she did in the plane but it only made the nausea worse. She swallowed once, twice, began to yawn. She tried anything to distract herself. Nothing. She had never left Florida before, never experienced mountains. At this rate, she wasn't sure she was going to like them. With each curve, the nausea rose. She eyed the door handle and imagined jumping out of the cab, walking the rest of the way. The idea brought a kind of relief until she remembered she didn't know where the cabin was without the driver's GPS. Franny wracked her brain trying to calculate how long they've been driving, and how much more they had to go.

"How much longer?" Franny asked. She didn't recognize the sound of her own voice, thick and short with effort. Everything in her brain screamed, begging her stomach to keep its contents.

"At least another thirty minutes. It's not so easy getting up these mountains."

The thought alone brought a foul-tasting burp. No good. Swallowing again, Franny asked her taxi driver to pull over.

#

When they finally arrived, Franny was sure the cab driver seemed too eager to leave her, opening her door and urging her out before rushing to the trunk and taking her suitcases out in bundles of two or three. He took her tip absentmindedly, standing a good deal away from her. Looking at him now, Franny thought he looked a little green as well. She thanked him profusely

for his care, apologized for her car sickness, but he waved her off and left before she could finish. The dust from the loose gravel settled, and the sigh of the departing taxi cab faded. Franny scuffled to the door, too afraid to make any real movements just yet. Her stomach gurgled and her head rang with the constant mantra don't barf, don't barf. The key was supposed to be placed underneath a stone carving of a toad in the small garden beside the front door, but the pine needles fell so densely that Franny could not make out any such decoration. After a few minutes of brushing aside layers of dirt and leaves, she found the key, caked with mud. How long had the key been there? And how could the owners just leave it there? Though, Franny supposed, there wasn't another soul around for miles. Franny pulled out a tissue and wiped the key clean before inserting it in the lock. The key was reluctant, and scrapped at the metal as it moved. Finally, the door opened.

The inside of the cabin looked no different from the outside, all log from floor to ceiling, with small, cloudy windows. Coats of dust layered the sheets placed over the only furniture: an old bed, a worn table, and a rickety chair. The kitchen faucet dripped brown water into a rusted sink, and what Franny thought to be a small closet turned out to be a bathroom barely large enough to step into. The transition was difficult. Franny spent the first few days pacing. The break in routine unnerved her. She longed for Florida, longed for her evening walks on the beach, for the feel of sand at her feet. The sound of the surf always calmed her, even in her deepest frenzies. When her frustration peaked, Franny ran outside and screamed. Miles and miles and no one to hear. Swallows scattered from their nests, but otherwise nothing. Instead, a particular strong gust of wind pushed itself through the leaves of the trees. The wind rushed toward her and twisted her hair around her face. She felt silly for yelling. Surrounded by acres of

trees, Franny felt small and that comforted her. She was not unlike her satellites in space, or the shells she collected on the beach. Franny closed her eyes, and was delighted to find the wind almost sounded like the surf on the beach. Perhaps she would do well here.

Now settled in, Franny's favorite part of the cabin is the open patio, made of the same, old wood as the rest of the house, it basks in the light of the early afternoon sun. Franny is sure this must have been what her boss had imagined when he reserved the cabin. On the patio, Franny settles into a dusty Adirondack chair and watches the towering trees bend slightly in the wind as swallows dive bomb after invisible insects from every direction.

#

That night Franny tosses and turns in the sheets that smell like cedar and dreams of the explosion. Seven dead, no that was '86. This time it was parts, only parts. Three hundred million dollars lost in parts. A satellite lost, years in the making, scrap metal scorched from reentry, and bent by the force of impact into the Pacific. All that work just to be placed in a bunker and forgotten. Franny dreams of the crew in the viewing room as the satellite falls, its flaps shuddering with friction. Sighs of disappointment in empty hallways where they think she can't hear but she does. The public blaming the government for cutting funding but it's her fault, her fault, her fault. The accusation echoes over and over until she wakes up, pine scented sheets drenched in sweat, her face crusted in tears.

#

That morning Franny is weary, eyes red and swollen, and every joint in her body aches in protest over a night spent hunched over her laptop typing code. Too afraid to dream again, Franny sat all night at the worn table. She is sure the cabin was used as a hunter's retreat, the

table a carving station, but now it is covered in sheet after sheet of penned-in calculations, the paper soft and dented in spots where tears stained like blood, blurring ink and blending numbers until she's no longer sure what they use to say.

When late morning light finally filters through the slats in her shutters, she pushes the calculations away and brews herself a pot of coffee. Two shots of espresso. The machine is slow to start, gurgling as water slips through the coffee grounds. Franny listens to it in a daze, and soon it becomes the sound of the inner workings of the satellite as it fails to stay in orbit. Franny pushes the thought away, and pours herself a full cup as soon as the machine whirls down with a beep. To keep her mind busy, Franny spends her time watching birds through a pair of old binoculars she found in a drawer. At first Franny wasn't sure what to do with her time. After thirty minutes of browsing through her endless collection of Kindle books and staring listlessly without reading, it became clear she would have to find other methods to distract herself. Her life had been coding in Titusville. Her life had been beaches and humidity and torrential rain. She helped send dozens of satellites into space, adjusting their orbits just so. She tried knitting, as a joke once, two Christmases ago. She wanted to knit a cable-knit sweater for Mira, her college roommate and friend. A marine biologist. Franny thought it would be funny. A fisherman's sweater for her fisherwoman. But Fanny found she lacked the patience for it, her hands wanting to go faster than her fledgling skill would allow. In the end, all her effort resulted in a long knot of red yarn. She stuffed it away in the back of a drawer, telling herself she could have a use for it later when in reality she just didn't want to look at it anymore.

Knitting again was out of the question. A chance visit to the library nearly half an hour Uber away results in borrowing a bird watching book. She flips delightedly through the pages,

taking obsessive joy in discovering new birds, and reacquainting herself with familiar ones. She memorizes paragraphs of migrations patterns and nesting behaviors. When her three-week rental is up, she pockets the worn book under a pillow and pretends she lost it, calling the library and promising to pay the fine. In those three weeks of quiet observation, she grows attached to a single brown cowbird who, according to the worn book, had apparently arrived in the summer earlier than the rest of his flock after a return from Mexico. She is sure the rest of the cowbirds are nearby but for now, she and the lone cowbird are sole companions. She knows he is close when she hears the familiar dewdrop that is his mating call, followed by the inevitable flutter of birds flying away from him. Another unsuccessful flirtation. Every day, Franny sends her sympathies in the form of a musty handful of seeds, the old bag found in a dark corner of the broom closet and originally meant for the finches who left with the last of spring. The cowbird doesn't seem to mind.

In the afternoon light, stray spiders travel on webs floating in the wind like hair, searching for new homes and new hunting grounds. Franny wishes them luck but ducks with every approaching strand, later finding a few lodged in her hair.

#

On hot days Franny sits on her bed with the blinds drawn, the fan slicing the air at full speed, its whirl lulling Franny to sleep. Outside the windows, birds peck at the seed thrown for them. She listens as a car rumbles up the dirt mountain road. Its engine sighs in the heat, and finally, rests in her driveway. A car door slams and the birds scatter. The sound of Mira, her soft humming, the shifting of gravel under her feet. She calls for Franny, tapping the ancient door with her foot.

Franny struggles to raise herself from the bed, the heat sapping away her strength. At the door she finds Mira grinning widely, hands full with a bottle of wine and a bag of overripe apples.

“Hey, Fran.”

#

Mira and Franny met the first day of freshman year at the University of Florida. Franny had initially felt awkward in Mira’s presence. While she and her parents were trucking in boxes full of desk lamps and textbooks, Mira sat on her bed and ordered young men where to place her belongings. When they left, Franny commented on how nice her brothers were to do that for her. Mira laughed and made a face.

“Them? No, I just met them outside.”

Franny immediately pegged Mira as an undesirable roommate. For weeks, Mira would bring home groups of boys she met around campus, laughing and flirting, but would send them home before they got any ideas. She’d promise to contact them again but gave them fake numbers every time. A few months into the semester, Franny thought Mira had finally found a boyfriend, but when Franny started panicking over a stats test, Mira volunteered to help and pushed the guy out so quickly that Franny actually felt sorry for him. Franny insisted Mira could bring him back in, but Mira only smiled and started writing equations for Franny to practice with. Neither of them ever saw him again. The two renewed their lease together the next year and the year after that, sticking together until graduate school. Even then, they always kept in touch, with Mira driving hours to visit Franny on weekends. Mira had recently married; an accountant Franny had met a few times. Looking at the two of them side by side, Franny thought

he was a little mousy for Mira, a small man five years Mira's junior, and already balding. When Franny reluctantly told her this after much prodding, Mira laughed and waved her arm dismissively.

"He never complains when I go to visit you. That's all I need."

#

Together they sit on the cabin's patio and down a large bottle of wine, listening to Mira's portable radio and the throb of blood as it fills their faces. Tomorrow they will regret this luxury. They are no longer in college. Their skin is freckled with too much sun, and their eyes wrinkle in the corners without having to smile. These are the days of hangovers.

The threat of a storm lingers on the horizon, miles away, its heavy clouds rumbling over the mountains, the sun still shining in the afternoon sky.

"Quite a life here, Fran. I hopped on the first flight from OIA as soon as I got your emails, but now I don't think I should have been so worried. How does it suit you?"

"It's alright," Fran shrugs. "I'd rather be back working."

"You will be, soon enough." Mira smiles. "Just give it time."

"Thank you for coming. You didn't have to. Your work..."

Mira laughs. "I don't know what I was thinking. You're always so mopey after I get you wine. Relax. I'm happy to be here."

Through the static over the radio they understand there is a meteor shower. Perseid. They look to each other and Mira grins.

"Work will wait."

Mira insists she is sober enough to drive, a heavyweight. Franny will not hear of it. They wait four hours, stuffing sourdough down and packing the car with boxes of stale crackers and remaining apples before leaving, heading south to the Great Sand Dunes.

Franny settles into the passenger seat, willing herself to relax. Despite the lulling effect of the wine and hot sun, she feels anxious, too aware. She's not sure of what. Mira's rental car is, unsurprisingly to Franny, already a mess. In the back, nets, vials, and soda cans are scattered about the floor, their bruised apples and crackers tossed haphazardly on top. She fishes one of the apples out of the back seat. Its red skin is bruised and soft, but she wants to occupy her hands with something, anything.

"How's your work going?" Franny asks, cutting up the apple with the dull plastic knife she found in Mira's glove box.

Mira smiles, comfortable, her hands placed at ten and two, something Franny knows is for her own benefit. Mira talks excitedly, still in love with her job. A marine biologist. Franny always imagined a marine biologist as someone who swam with whales and trained Orcas. Mira had since convinced her otherwise, telling her of water samples and observing the fish population of local rivers. Still, Franny cannot shake the image of her friend sitting on the mildewed deck of a shrimp boat, staring at the stars in the jet black darkness, the gentle lull of soft waves and the glow of phosphorescent plankton dancing in her wake.

"There's a whale, a baleen, which we've been tracking since '92. From what we can tell, she's been traveling alone now for twelve years."

"Why? I thought whales travelled in groups?" Fran wipes the smashed pulp from her hands on a crumpled napkin.

“Pods.” Mira says. “She’s different than the other whales of her species. She sings her song at fifty-two hertz, while the others sing only from twelve to twenty-five.”

“So?”

“Her song’s too high for them to hear.”

There is a weight in Fran’s chest as she imagines the whale going through life alone, nothing but blue for as far as she can see, calling and calling and never being answered. The thought is too familiar, too real. Franny has always been anxious. She knows this. It’s kept her from making friends for much of her life. People think she’s too jittery, too worried to be any fun. Mira is the only one to see past that. Franny thinks of Mira, with her team of marine biologists on her ship, no one around for miles. So far away from Franny. Mira’s ship just a blip on the vast ocean.

Mira looks at Franny and smiles, and as if she knows what Franny is thinking, says “I’m here, Fran.”

#

That night at the rest stop, Franny doesn’t want to sleep, doesn’t want to dream of the whale. Instead, she forces her tired eyes to focus on satellites. In this part of the country, somewhere between Colorado Springs and Pueblo, the sky is rich and dark, shaded like velvet. In five minutes, three satellites inch their way across the indigo sky. Occasionally the sun’s ray will hit one just right, sending a flash of light their way like a beacon. Two thousand two hundred and seventy-one satellites circle the earth at once. To avoid being pulled into the earth’s atmosphere, they fly at a speed of seventeen thousand miles an hour, coming and going in that darkness in mere seconds. Her job, before the accident, had been to write code for some of them, to ensure

the satellites kept on their path, to keep them from crashing into one another. The smallest mistake could lead to a crash, plummeting back to earth in fiery pieces. Nothing like that had ever happened on her watch until just a month ago. She had checked and rechecked every figure. A mere hyphen, so insignificant to some, had been missed in the code for the Mariner I in '62. Five minutes into flight and the unmanned space probe had to be terminated. Fran was just a girl when it happened. Her whole class had stopped to watch it on their small TV. She cried for days afterward. Fran never forgot, so how did she let this slip? Three ones, placed so close together that they looked like four. That one extra digit was all it took. Spinning so fast, plummeting too far for anyone to do anything. Stay up, she willed it. And still, it crashed. It landed in the ocean, but what if Mira had been there, on her boat, among the phosphorescent algae and plankton.

What if it had killed Mira's whale?

"I'm not a satellite," Mira says. "I'm here."

Franny had not realized Mira was awake, had not seen Mira watching her.

"We can keep driving, if you want."

"I'll drive," Franny agrees, "you sleep."

As Franny drives, she focuses on the sound of Mira's constant snoring to calm her. Mira always snored, a loud, unapologetic snore. When Franny brought it up after their first night in their college dorm, Mira grinned.

"The best snore west of the Nile." Franny wasn't sure what that meant. She did her best to block the sound, holding pillows to her ears, earplugs, even gifting Mira with nasal strips. Nothing worked. It wasn't until Mira left for home one weekend that Franny realized the sound had become like white noise to her, a security blanket of sorts.

When they arrive at the Dunes, it is past midnight, and heavy clouds block the sky. They sign in at the Ranger Station, opened just for the meteor shower, and rent a spot at the campgrounds, sleeping in Mira's car with the seats stretched out and windows cracked open. Finally, with Mira's ever constant snoring, Franny sleeps.

#

Mira nudges Franny awake, pointing through the open sunroof. The green glow of Franny's watch says it's nearly five in the morning. Outside, the sky is a deep blue, the glow of an orange sunrise distant on the horizon. Above them, flashes of meteors sweep by like sped up satellites. Franny nods, and they head out.

The sand of the dunes is cold against their bare feet. They slip this way and that, each hill giving way from underneath their weight, their legs stiff and joints aching from hours in the confined car.

Looking around, Franny feels as if they are chasing shooting stars in a post-apocalyptic world, the luminous sand whispering back over each footstep, sparkling like crystals in the last light of the full moon. She imagines the world in thousands of years, however many it takes, when the last of the world's satellites fall back to Earth, like shooting stars, their distant booms shattering the earth, scorching the fine sands of the dunes into glass.

They sit on the biggest dune they can find, and watch as the meteors zip by. Watching them, Franny feels nostalgic. They remind her of shuttle launches, nights spent at the beach watching the glow of the thrusters, their bright orange light reflecting in the waves. Franny grabs fistfuls of sand and lets it fall through her fingers, the familiar tickle soothing her.

“Fran, I saw the code on your table back in Denver. Do you want to tell me what that’s about?”

Franny looks at Mira, her eyes locked on the sky, darting from one meteor to the next.

“No.”

“Really?” Mira asks, turning to Franny, eyebrows raised.

“I mistakenly added a number. That’s why the satellite crashed soon after entering orbit.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s good. Look, it’s a shame your satellite fell. You’ll get it right next time.”

Mira gives Franny’s shoulder what is supposed to be a comforting squeeze, like the stewardess on the plane, but Franny brushes it off, leaning away from her.

“You don’t understand. Someone could have been hurt.” Franny hears her voice getting higher, feels her jaw clench and shake as her anger summons tears.

“But you said they weren’t.”

“The parts, the money it took...”

“That’s unimportant.”

Franny sits there, fuming, unsure how to convey the loss.

“You always do this. You latch onto one bad thing and you refuse to let it go. You can’t keep doing that. It’s not good for you. You’ll die of stress and then where will I be?”

Franny pictures Mira on the boat, this time without her crew, without her whale, without the stars, and without her. This time she really does seem lonely.

“I need you just as much as you need me.” Mira bumps her shoulder against Franny’s, drawing forth a giggle. “Look.” Mira says, pointing to the sky, singling out a small blinking light, moving slowly across the sky. “One of yours?”

Franny has to rub the tears out of her eyes before she can see it. In all that sea of nothing, a satellite. Maybe even her satellite, her work. She has no way of knowing for sure, but the sight is reassuring.

“Seems to be doing exactly as it should, don’t you think?”

Franny nods, and takes Mira’s hand in hers, giving it a grateful squeeze. Together, they watch the satellite make its trek across the sky, following its path as it should, Franny’s code copied exactly.

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